


Sound faith

Mennonite hymnals and identity

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When my son was a toddler, I once heard him singing via a baby monitor. It was not a nursery rhyme or the alphabet that he sang but the eighteenth-century English hymn text “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing,” paired with the nineteenth-century American tune NETTLETON. This was one of our go-to sing-along songs in the car and at bedtime, and he could sing every word of all three stanzas. By internalizing this song, he joined generations of people for whom this style of poetry and music forms a core canon of congregational music.

Songs sung repeatedly over the course of years provide an enduring part of communal and individual faith formation. Songs are far more memorable than speech or prose. (It is said that no one has ever left worship humming the sermon.) They reside



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in a deeper part of the brain than other forms of language. Evidence and experience consistently demonstrates that even when speech is lost due to injury or dementia, song often remains. Because of this, the selection of music for worship, and the creation of a canon of congregational repertoire, is a key element in

faith formation. Our shared song shapes not only our theology but also our perception of the church. Is what we sing a reflection of our congregations, of our faith tradition, and of our denomination? What cultures are reflected in and cultivated by our canon?

For those who use hymnals, the congregational canon may seem obvious. The hymnal itself is one form of canon. However, a hymnal typically contains much more material than any given congregation will use. Repetition, cultural affinity, associations with particular events or people, and theological resonance are all factors in what becomes part of a canon. Certain songs may seem essential to one congregation, region, or conference, while being relatively unknown in another. Because of its size, a hymnal's

canon has the capacity to represent far more than any one congregation within its binding. In doing so, it can reflect a broader church and provide ways for disparate parts of that church to learn about one another. In my master's thesis for Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary—titled “Who Do You Sing that I Am?”—I examined how Mennonite hymnals presented the life and person of Jesus. In this article I attempt to describe how the contents of Mennonite hymnals have changed to reflect our evolving denominations. We might ask, “Who do we sing that we are?” The question here is not so much about the textual content of the material—although that would be a fascinating question to explore as well. Instead, I look at what source material has shaped our hymnals.

Mennonite hymnals have drawn on several different streams of congregational song to create canons. The history of these hymnals may be described in terms of streams joining and integrating a greater variety of song over time. The succession of hymnals has reflected an expanding vision of the church they served—and for each hymnal, decisions were made, for better or worse, about what types of music were suitable for worship. In this brief tour through a century of the English language hymnals of the denominations that formed Mennonite Church USA and Mennonite Church Canada, I examine how those genres have shifted over time in these canons. A sampling of few writers and composers traced across those canons provide a snapshot of those changes.

Early twentieth century

The “Old” Mennonite Church produced *Church Hymnal* in 1927. It is primarily shaped by English language singing traditions, with a heavy reliance on the works of Isaac Watts (50 texts) and Charles Wesley (33 texts). Its committee “made its selection of hymns with a view to the Scriptural teaching rather than to the spiritual emotions expressed in the hymn. . . . It was the impression of the Committee that it was more advisable to encourage the use of the earlier type of Church music, with its richness of devotion and reverence to the holiness and majesty of our God and Savior, than to cultivate the desire for the lighter and more emotional song form of the modern age.”¹ Despite that stated concern, a decree from the Mennonite Mission Board in 1925 obligated the editors to include a substantial number of “songs with refrains,” meaning (white) Gospel songs. Mennonite hymnologist Mary Oyer lamented that decision, writing, “I

1 *Church Hymnal* (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1927), v.

have always attributed the ‘grayness’ of the *Church Hymnal* to that rather high-handed act in 1925.”² One writer associated with this style of music is Fanny Crosby; eleven of her texts are included. A few items by Mennonite writers and composers also appear.

Mennonite Hymnary, published in 1940 for General Conference Mennonites, is explicit in naming the streams from which it draws. The editors describe the bulk of the book as “standard hymns, selected from ancient

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and modern sources.”³ Those make up the first four hundred and two items. Next are “Hymns for Children.” Those are followed by “Gospel Songs,” which prompted a paragraph of explanation from the editors. They describe the controversy surrounding this genre in terms that sound remarkably similar to criticisms of contemporary worship music in recent years: “Some think the words of the Gospel songs are too self-centered

and individualistic in their thought; the tunes, with their snappy choruses, too sentimental and undignified to have a place in church worship.” The editors defend their inclusion, although they conclude with the hope that “no congregation will confine its singing to the Gospel songs to the neglect of” the other genres.⁴ Ten Fanny Crosby selections appear. Gospel songs are followed by “The Church Year in Chorales,” of which the editors state, “In all of our hymnody there is nothing finer than these [German] Chorales. They are noble, dignified and powerful.”⁵ Metrical Psalms and a section of “Responses, Chants, Doxologies, and Amens” complete the musical portions of the hymnal.

The elevation of German material in *Mennonite Hymnary* stands in contrast to *Church Hymnal*, for which the “Music Committee’s Notes” references its reliance on English language sources, stating, “German language, the language of our forefathers, is rich in hymns and tunes of the highest spiritual value but it was found that generally translations from

2 Mary Oyer, *Exploring the Mennonite Hymnal: Essays* (Newton, KS: Faith and Life, 1980), 67.

3 *Mennonite Hymnary* (Newton, KS: Mennonite Publication Office, 1940), v.

4 *Mennonite Hymnary*, vi.

5 *Mennonite Hymnary*, v.

German have proved unsatisfactory in form and expression of thought.”⁶ Compared to *Church Hymnal*’s eighty-three Watts and Wesley texts, *Mennonite Hymnary* included twenty by Watts and twenty-four by Wesley; the *Hymnary*, however, features twenty-five translations of German texts by nineteenth-century writer Catherine Winkworth, while none of her work appears in *Church Hymnal*. In *Mennonite Hymnary*, few Mennonites are named among the authors and composers.

Late twentieth century

The Mennonite Hymnal of 1969 was a joint effort of “Old” and General Conference Mennonites. This merging of streams is reflected in the materials selected. There are thirty texts by Winkworth, twenty-eight by Wesley, and thirty-seven by Watts. Among the Gospel song repertoire are twelve pieces by Crosby. In the introduction, Mary Oyer describes the blend in this way:

*Mennonites who have remained close to their German background still sing Lutheran chorales; chorale texts and tunes are well represented. Those who spoke English in the early nineteenth century absorbed the American tradition of Watts’ texts—along with authors such as Wesley and Newton—and replaced their Germanic past with American tunes and folk hymns from the singing-school tradition. These strands—German and American—join in this book to enrich the resources of each. The Mennonites’ use of the more recent Gospel Songs is perpetuated in this book with a collection in a separate section.*⁷

To these resources, the hymnal adds three translations from the earliest Anabaptist hymnal, *The Ausbund*, as well as a few tunes by Mennonite composers. Significantly, there are six “non-Western” hymns, which Oyer describes as a token of “the committees’ interest in being a part of the worldwide church.”⁸

Hymnal: A Worship Book was published in 1992, continuing the partnership of General Conference and “Old” Mennonites and adding the Church of the Brethren. “Gospel” music from white singing traditions

6 *Church Hymnal*, v.

7 Mary Oyer, “Introduction,” in *The Mennonite Hymnal* (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1969).

8 Oyer, “Introduction.”

was no longer separated into its own section of the hymnal. Five examples of Black Gospel music are included, along with fifteen Spirituals. Music from around the world appears throughout, including nine from Spanish language sources. In the introduction, managing editor Rebecca Slough writes, “Our singing has been shaped by hymns created throughout the

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centuries of Christian history, and expanded by hymns set in contemporary idioms. The presence of African-American, Asian, Native American, Hispanic, and African hymns deepens our sense of unity in Christ through the Spirit.”⁹

The cultural and ethnic makeup of the Mennonite denominations in North America was changing, and that evolution influenced the hymnal. In addition,

there had been significant expansion within white, Euro-American singing traditions that shaped the hymnal’s contents. In the two decades following the publication of *The Mennonite Hymnal*, the English-speaking world experienced a renaissance of hymn writing now commonly described as a “hymn explosion.” The hymn explosion ignited in England but quickly spreading to the United States and Canada, as writers used common hymn meters so that their texts could be sung with familiar tunes. Composers writing in modern styles influenced by both folk and art song also emerged to provide new tunes. Several prominent writers represented by multiple texts in *Hymnal: A Worship Book* include Carl Daw (8), Ruth Duck (3), Fred Pratt Green (9), Christopher Idle (5), Fred Kaan (3), Thomas Troeger (6), and Brian Wren (14).¹⁰ Mennonite Brethren poet Jean Janzen also created eight texts for the collection. Roughly ninety-four items in *Hymnal: A Worship Book* have Anabaptist origins for text, tune, or both.

Over the same period, Catholic churches were experimenting with new forms of vernacular song following the reforms of Vatican II. While the hymnal only includes a few examples of Protestant “praise and worship music” (as it was termed at the time), it presents a number of Cath-

9 Rebecca Slough, “Introduction,” in *Hymnal: A Worship Book* (Elgin, IL: Brethren Press, 1992), iii.

10 While that total of forty-eight songs is substantial, historical material is still prominent; Watts, Wesley, and Winkworth combine for a total of sixty texts in the hymnal, and Crosby has eight among the book’s Gospel song selections.

olic folk selections by composers like Marty Haugen (6 items), who is not Catholic himself but is closely associated with the genre.

The ecumenical Taizé community in France is the source for fourteen short refrains, which provide a repetitive, meditative way of singing. That function marks a substantial evolution from 1927, when the editors of *Church Hymnal* viewed the expression of “spiritual emotion” with suspicion.

Twenty-first-century

In the first decade of this century, *Sing the Journey* (2005) and *Sing the Story* (2007) further expanded the repertoire available to hymnal-using Mennonites. Of particular note is music by John Bell and the Iona Community in Scotland as well as compositions by Mennonite James Clemens. The books include more examples of Catholic folk and add other under-represented genres like jazz. A few more “praise and worship” pieces appear as well.

Clearly, the musical and linguistic palate available to hymnal using Mennonites grew substantially from 1927 to 2007. And yet, many Mennonites do not use the denominational hymnal as a main source for worship songs. Congregations that worship primarily in languages other than English are likely to draw on other sources, as do congregations that worship using “contemporary worship music” (now the preferred term for what has historically been called “praise and worship”).

The committee that assembled *Voices Together* (2020) for Mennonite Church Canada and Mennonite Church USA (on which I served) had to consider both who it would *resource* (that is, what churches would be likely to purchase and use the collection) and who it would *represent*. We sought ways to engage material important to communities who would not be likely to use the hymnal. Our hope was to help hymnal-using Mennonites to learn to sing with non-hymnal using Mennonites. The distinctions among congregations are not clear-cut; many (perhaps most) Mennonite congregations in the United States and Canada were already engaging in music from outside of denominational printed resources. Contemporary worship music is a substantial part of many congregational canons. This led us to include approximately seventy songs in *Voices Together* that can be grouped under the contemporary worship music umbrella.¹¹

¹¹ The number is approximate because of blurriness of definitions and intersections between genres.

Additional shifts in the *Voices Together* canon were similarly oriented toward listening to the concerns of communities being represented. Historically there has been some disconnect between what Mennonite hymnals adopt from non-dominant communities and what those communities sing themselves. For example,

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while the African-American spirituals found in *Hymnal: A Worship Book* are historically important, they are only a small portion of the music sung in African-American congregations. We sought to learn what songs these communities considered essential rather than only seeking out what hymnal users might


enjoy or find easiest to adopt. In conversation with African American consultants, we increased the proportion of contemporary material in *Voices Together*. Thirty-one pieces are indexed as representing “Heritage: African American,” of which approximately half are Spirituals. Similar shifts occurred in relation to music from several other communities, including those that primarily use Spanish in worship. There was a major increase in the number of songs featuring the Spanish language, from eight in *Hymnal: A Worship Book* to forty-nine in *Voices Together*. Some fifty languages other than English appear in the hymnal among the songs and worship resources.

Voices Together also deepens the historical roots of our sung repertoire. There is more material adapted from early Anabaptist sources and an intentional spanning of the breadth of Christian history. Texts by Watts, Wesley, and Winkworth remain important, totaling twenty-eight texts. The (white) Gospel tradition remains strong, although it makes up a smaller proportion of the collection; Crosby is represented by five selections. The “hymn explosion” writers listed above have a combined total of fifty-four texts in *Voices Together*. More recent writers like Mary Louise Bringle (16 texts) continue to expand that style of repertoire. Marty Haugen has fourteen texts, and John Bell eighteen. The Taizé community is the source for fifteen songs. Among Anabaptist contributors mentioned in previous collections, Janzen authored five texts, and Clemens composed twenty-one tunes. In total, one hundred and eighty-three of the musical selections in *Voices Together* have elements of text or tune contributed by an Anabaptist—nearly double the number in *Hymnal: A Worship Book*.

For the first time in this lineage of hymnals, the composer of the most tunes (Clemens) and the author of the most texts (myself, 23) are both Mennonites. It is noteworthy that both of us have become well established in recent years in ecumenical hymnody, with multiple selections appearing in several hymnals of other denominations prior to *Voices Together*. Our work was anonymized before being reviewed by the *Voices Together* committee; presumably, the Mennonite “accent” of our submissions resonated even without revealing the identities of the creators.

This brief overview of several hymnals does not consider the spoken resources that most of the hymnals provide. These sections also reveal an increasing diversity of sources and a growing influence of Anabaptist writers. A new kind of resource is also present in *Voices Together*: for the first time, visual art is included in the midst of the songs. Twelve selections in a variety of media expand our perception of what kind of art may be part of Mennonite worship. Significantly, all twelve pieces are by Mennonite artists.

In any attempt to represent a diverse church, there will be successes and failures. The core of English and German hymnody of the earlier hymnals still provides the musical foundation for *Voices Together*, reflect-



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ing two of the major streams that have contributed to our denomination’s history in North America. While various additions and expansions have provided a broader picture, it is still incomplete. There are unfortunate gaps in our repertoire. For example, although the Mennonite church in Ethiopia, Meserete Kristos, is one of the largest Mennonite bodies in the world, *Voices Together* does not have any songs in Ethiopian languages or musical idioms. There are also emerging forms of congregational song that reflect rap and hip-hop styles, which

are not represented. It is inevitable that the next group to create a worship resource for Mennonites will identify additional gaps and find new forms of song to fill them.

It remains to be seen how *Voices Together* will shape the faith of the church it attempts to represent. It takes its place among generations of hymnals that have each reflected and shaped worship. Every hymnal

builds on what came before, setting aside some things to make room for new material. Each new book has provided the opportunity to understand anew what the church is and who it includes.

About the author

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