

Discomfort and gratitude

Learning new songs in worship

Anneli Loepp Thiessen

*And so we thank you,
For lyrics that push us past our reasons,
For melodies that break open our givens,
For cadences that locate us home,
Beyond all our safe places,
For tones and tunes that open our lives beyond control
And our futures beyond despair.*

—Walter Brueggemann

The process of adopting a hymnal is unsurprisingly emotional. Through the songs and words of worship, we encounter a God who is moving beyond our understanding, a Christ who challenges our assumptions, and a Spirit who guides us to where we belong. After years of gathering weekly for worship, we become comfortable with what we know; a new hymnal pushes us beyond this. Many of the churches and communities I have worked with in adopting *Voices Together* notice increased anxiety and tension in addition to excitement and joy as they welcome a new hymnal. These are all natural responses to a process that is sure to expand our understanding and show us new ways of worshiping.

I believe that one of the unique gifts of *Voices Together* is its ability to help us grow beyond what we know. While there is beauty and connection in the familiar, we encounter God in new ways when we move into the unknown. I have heard Mennonite congregations profess that they are comfortable with any music “as long as it’s notated.” Others will try out any style “except for praise and worship music.” Some are interested in new words to sing, but will “only sing in English.” Yet Psalm 96 calls us to “sing to God a new song,” a call we take seriously when we step beyond our comfort zones toward new ways of singing. Singing a new song doesn’t necessarily mean singing new lyrics set to a familiar tune, or singing a new melody that sounds similar to the other melodies we know and

love. As we adopt *Voices Together*, singing a new song might mean trying something completely new.

In the above prayer included in *Voices Together* (882), Walter Brueggeman thanks God for three distinct gifts: lyrics that push us past our reasons, melodies that break open our givens, and cadences that locate us home. Amid nervousness and unfamiliarity, the gifts that Brueggeman outlines offer a way for us to thank God for this new hymnal, despite discomfort. The following reflections offer a way to encounter some of the newness of this collection with gratitude and appreciation for the new growth that accompanies it.

And so we thank you: for lyrics that push us past our reasons

As a church, we live in the world of reasoning. Many Mennonite churches form committees, sign community understandings, join book clubs, and write beautifully crafted articulations of what they believe. This reasoning is *good*, but sometimes we must go beyond it to experience God who is bigger than our understanding. We need lyrics that draw us outside of ourselves, that say things we might not think to say ourselves but desperately need to voice. We need lyrics that push and prod at our faith, that take us in new directions.

Voices Together contains so many rich examples of lyrics that push and prod me. Some of these songs, such as “Hakuna Wakaita Sa Jesu (There’s No One in This World Like Jesus)” (68), are from other cultures that articulate a commitment to following Jesus that is different than I could express on my own. Other songs find new ways to name God, ways that might sound foreign at first but soon become names that feel like home—songs like “Like a Rock” (63), which describes God as a rock, a starry night sky, the sun. Some of these songs, such as “Lord I Need You” (155), remind me of my own shortcomings, naming my need for God. Other songs feature open ended poetry, pushing me to step into the mystery of my faith; songs like as “Word and Sign” (483) and “Open the Eyes of My Heart/Ouvre les yeux/Abre mis ojos” (401) are good examples of such poetic songs. Together, these lyrics ground us in a faith that is full, living, breathing, growing, and whole. Thank you, God, for lyrics that push us past our reasons.

And so we thank you: for melodies that break open our givens

Many of us can become comfortable with words that are new to us, but we have trouble with melodies that are not familiar. We come to church rife

with givens about our melodies: ideas of what our church music should sound like, what kind of harmonies should be present, how we should learn new songs. This poem calls us to be thankful for melodies that *break open* these givens, that provide us with what we do not expect.

I see these melodies in new kinds of music. Contemporary worship music, for example, is structured differently than four part hymns; it is

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built around verses and choruses and follows popular music styles. Those of us that are comfortable reading sheet music often come to expect that we will be able to learn new music instantaneously, and the process of relying on aural learning can be beautifully uncomfortable. If this is a new style for people, it breaks them open and makes them vulnerable.¹ Contemporary worship songs to try include “Build My Life” (92), which has topped the Christian Copyright Licensing International Top 100 list of most accessed

songs, or “Oceans/Oceanos/Tu voz me llama a las aguas” (456), which works beautifully as a song for baptisms or renewal of baptismal commitment.

New, long, complex four part harmony songs can be hard to read, but the process of learning them makes us students. As someone who is classically trained but happiest learning music aurally, I sympathize with those who grow impatient when a song is difficult to learn. I experienced this when sight reading “The Lord Is Risen Indeed” (357), a beloved hymn that can be daunting to read for those who are encountering it for the first time. We can meet God in this learning, humbling ourselves as we make mistakes and open ourselves to the creativity of others. Thank you, God, for melodies that break open our givens.

And so we thank you: for cadences that locate us home

After addressing lyrics and melodies that push us, stretch us, help us grow, the final step is to thank God for cadences that locate us home. When

¹ For more on contemporary worship music in *Voices Together*, see “Guide to Contemporary Worship Music in *Voices Together*,” by Sarah Kathleen Johnson, Darryl Neustaedter Barg, Benjamin Bergey, and Anneli Loepp Thiessen, 2021, <http://voicestogetherhymnal.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/CWM-in-VT.pdf>.

we speak, the cadence is the rhythm of our speech, recognizable to those around us. In music, however, a cadence also refers to melodic and harmonic movement that brings music to rest. These cadences can be at the end of a phrase, a section, a movement, or a whole song. No matter where it lands, it is a place where we pause or stop.

Despite all of the newness, creativity, and excitement in *Voices Together*, we also need cadences that bring us to rest. These locate us home and keep us grounded, reminding us of where we came from. There is so much new to receive in this hymnal, but there is also so much that stays the same. While there is a call to grow, there is also a call to come back to what we love.

Throughout the *Voices Together* process, we did a lot of work with heart songs, or the songs that have been with us for our whole lives. Maybe they're songs you sang at your baptism, at a wedding, at the bedside of someone you love who was dying. These songs bring us home. They draw us close to God and bring us comfort. Some of the most requested heart songs for *Voices Together* were VT #549 "Be Thou My Vision" (549) and

"10,000 Reasons" (111).² So while we thank God for what is new and stretching, we also celebrate what is familiar and comfortable.

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As you engage lyrics that push you past your reasons, melodies that break open your givens, and cadences that locate you home, I hope you will feel, see, and know God. This is a holy journey, and we do not walk it alone. If you are part of a community that adopts this

hymnal, you will meet others on the journey that you did not expect to meet but who had a message you needed to hear. You may need to let go of ideas you wanted to hold on to. You will find yourselves energized, exhausted, and full of new wisdom. You will receive the most when you allow yourself to become vulnerable to what is new. My prayer is that you will push yourselves beyond your comfort zones and have soft landings when you need to come home; that you will sing the words that you might not choose but that those around you need to hear; that you will find

² For a list of top recommended heart songs, see "Guide to Adopting Voices Together," 2020, <http://voicestogetherhymnal.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Guide-to-Adopting-Voices-Together-download.pdf>.

the songs that others overlook but that let you feel God's presence more closely than ever.

About the author

Anneli Loepp Thiessen is a PhD student in the Interdisciplinary Music Research program at the University of Ottawa, where her research promotes an interdisciplinary musicological approach to issues of equity, diversity, and inclusion in music industries and music education. Her dissertation examines the influence of complementarian theology and industry practices on women's roles in the contemporary worship music industry. She has presented her research at conferences around the world and is published in several journals. She enjoys writing congregational music, particularly when it enlivens expansive images for God. Anneli was on the *Voices Together* hymnal committee and serves as co-director of Anabaptist Worship Network.