

A SNAPSHOT OF WORSHIP IN WELS

What does worship in our synod look like? If a picture is worth a thousand words, just three pictures could say more than this article will be able to. So what would those pictures look like? Would they show large sanctuaries with vaulted ceilings or tiny storefronts with makeshift altars? Would they show aging German farmers sitting on wooden pews or young suburbanite families sprawled out on aluminum folding chairs? Would they show pipe organs or digital pianos? A brass ensemble or an acoustic guitar?

Inevitably, any set of pictures that would attempt to capture the character of worship in our church body would include the familiar red book that sits in our pews, the one we've finally stopped calling "the new hymnal" and now know simply as *Christian Worship*.

In public worship, people of different ages, races, and backgrounds come together for a single purpose, to declare "the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord, his power, and the wonders he has done" (Psalm 78:4). Public worship requires each of us to set aside our own personal preferences and instead show concern for the entire body of Christ. As a result, it's only natural that — for better or worse — a church body's hymnal will shape that church body's worship.

That makes the development of a new hymnal a rather daunting task. From the outset, those entrusted with that task have sought to listen to what the people of our church body have to say about worship. One sentence in the hymnal project's mission statement puts it this way: "This hymnal will be produced with thorough study of the character of worship in WELS and the prayer that it may be used joyfully by the people and congregations of our synod."

To that end, the hymnal project's communications committee has been busy working to understand what characterizes worship in our church body. At the beginning of each of the past two church years, all congregations were invited to participate in a weekly review process in which they submit information and feedback on their worship. Roughly one hundred congregations have been participating each week. Hymn usage data has been collected from any congregation willing to share it. Our project director, Pastor Michael Schultz, has been invited to many conferences and conventions throughout the synod and has collected feedback at each one. Our project website (welshymnal.com) includes a contact form through which upwards of a thousand comments have been submitted. Finally, four surveys were conducted in 2014. Survey 1 was intended for pastors, survey 2 for teachers, survey 3 for musicians, and survey 4 for any and all worshipers. Among those four surveys, just shy of 7,200 responses were received.

The information gathered in these various ways has been processed and shared with all those working on the project. Several additional research efforts are planned for 2015.

So what does worship in our synod look like? What hymns, psalms, orders of service, and other resources in a new hymnal will most benefit worship in our church body?

After looking at a great deal of information and listening to a great deal of input, the task of developing a new hymnal might seem even more daunting. Points of view vary greatly. A relatively equal number of equally passionate comments have been offered from opposite points of view. After reading some of the comments we've received and data we've collected, one might be tempted to think that developing a single set of resources that serves and shapes the public worship of our church body is a futile endeavor.

However, such varying points of view lead us to remember what Paul told the Corinthians: "Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ." (1 Corinthians 12:12). In Christ, what unites us far surpasses that which makes us different. Furthermore, variety within the body of Christ is not to be lamented but rather celebrated. Finally, when our eyes are opened to some of the different viewpoints within our church body, it's a needed and healthy reminder that we must continually strive to seek the good of the whole body in our public worship. As Paul said, "When you come together, each of you has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. Everything must be done so that the church may be built up" (1 Corinthians 14:26).

What follows, then, is an attempt to summarize what those working on the hymnal project have learned about worship in our church body so far. It is our hope that the information shared below will lead us to celebrate all that unites us in Christ and will spur us on to show love for the wide variety of people who worship with us in our congregations and across our church body.

PEOPLE DESIRE TO PARTICIPATE IN WORSHIP

The people of our church body want to be actively involved in worship. Specifically, they love to sing and want to continue to be able to do so. Seventy-nine percent of those who completed survey 4 described themselves this way: "I enjoy singing and feel confident doing so." A good portion of those who completed the same survey (34%) indicated that they enjoy singing in parts. Many of the comments that have been critical of *Christian Worship* have been related to features of the hymnal that negatively affect a person's ability to sing. When asked about a choir's participation in worship, many comments indicated that worshipers do not want too many parts of the service normally sung by the congregation to be given to the choir.

So if people love to sing, what sometimes stands in the way? Quite a few individuals point to the range of a hymn. Just over 50% of those who filled out survey 4 commented that hymns often have notes that are too high for them to sing. Quite a few comments have been submitted requesting that hymn keys be lowered.

Related to the range of hymns and songs of the service, some have indicated that they often sing in harmony because it enables them to sing a part that is more in their range. In fact, one of the requests we've heard most frequently is for songs of the printed orders of service to include all four parts rather than just melody.

Speaking of singing in parts, a common complaint about some of the hymns in *Christian Worship* has been that the harmony settings are too difficult. A solid majority (83%) of the musicians who filled out our third survey indicated that the difficulty level of *Christian Worship* hymns and songs was "Just right for the average musician." Most of the respondents for survey 3 were organists and keyboardists. When it comes to singing, however, we have heard a different tune. Both the worshipers in the pew and the choirs in the balcony have expressed a desire for harmony settings for hymns that are simpler and easier to sing.

A topic that also comes up in connection with singing is variety. Plenty of people have commented that there is already too much variety in worship. Some of those same voices are concerned that a new hymnal will only lead to less familiarity with an ever-increasing array of resources and that, as a result, singing will suffer. Others would like to see more variety so that what they are singing doesn't become stale. In the question on survey 4 that asked about the variety of hymn styles in *Christian Worship*, 8% indicated that there is too much, while 22% indicated there is not enough.

Even though there are differences of opinion regarding the best way to facilitate singing, it has been encouraging to hear how strongly people desire to sing in worship. It is also a good reminder that, whether it's a decade-long hymnal project or the weekly work of organists, instrumentalists, and choirs, the goal should always be to encourage and facilitate the active participation of the people worshipping.

PEOPLE DESIRE CHRIST-CENTERED WORSHIP

As encouraging as it is to hear that people love to participate in worship, it's even more encouraging to hear how strongly they desire Christ-centered worship.

One of the ways in which the desire for Christ-centered worship is seen most clearly is the widespread use of the *Christian Worship* and *Christian Worship Supplement* lectionaries. Ninety-four percent of the pastors who filled out survey 1 indicated that they use these yearly schedules of Scripture readings as the backbone for their worship each week.

It is certainly possible to have Christ-centered worship without following the lectionary. At the same time, these lectionaries have long proven to be valuable resources for the Church's annual proclamation of Christ. Their widespread use among our churches reflects a desire for the life and teachings of Christ to continue to serve as the focus for our worship.

In addition to the use of our lectionaries (which is probably the pastor's decision in most cases), worship planners, choir directors, and musicians have also indicated that Christ-centered worship is a high priority. In survey 3, 86% of respondents indicated that the most important factor for them when selecting music for worship is its specific connection to the gospel-centered focus of the day. When asked to indicate what new resources and tools would most assist them in their work, those most commonly requested are ones that would help them more quickly and easily make that connection. One resource already available, Planning Christian Worship, provides summaries of each week's lesson along with a list of hymn suggestions. That resource is very commonly used and well-liked by pastors and worship planners.

Finally, one of the requests most frequently made through our website's comment form is for the inclusion of Scripture references with the hymns. On survey 4, nearly half of those who responded (49%) indicated that they would benefit greatly from the inclusion of these references.

Again, it is encouraging to see how concerned people are in the content of what goes on in worship, namely, that it richly and clearly proclaims the gospel of Jesus Christ.

PEOPLE (OUGHT TO) DESIRE TIMELESS WORSHIP

Perhaps the area where the sharpest disagreement occurs is over whether our worship should be more "traditional" or more "contemporary." This disagreement certainly isn't new and doesn't come as much of a surprise. It also isn't a surprise that those terms are often used in different ways by different people, are often misunderstood, and rarely help groups of people have beneficial discussions about worship.

A question on survey 4 asked for people's input about various styles of hymns. Every style of hymn listed is currently found in the hymnal or supplement except one. It was labeled "Christian Contemporary Music," and three artists were listed as examples.

That was the style of hymn where the responses were most sharply divided. Even though none of the artists mentioned are currently represented in our hymnal or supplement, 20% of respondents still indicated that there is "too much" of that style in those resources. On the other hand, 40% indicated that there is "not enough." In the comments connected with that question, there were people who pleaded for more Luther, Bach, and Gregorian chant. Just as many pleaded for more contemporary music, gospel music, and Christian rock. The comments that have come in through our website have indicated some of the same polarity.

So what does this mean? First of all, it indicates that when people hear the word "contemporary," they often have a strong and immediate reaction that is either very positive or very negative. The same is probably true when people hear the word "traditional." In love for the entire body of Christ, we owe it to our brothers and sisters to be aware of these different

viewpoints and seek to understand them. It is so easy to surround ourselves with those who think like we do and refuse to understand those who don't.

Those who have submitted comments pleading for a more traditional worship style have often explained that they are concerned about doctrinal purity and clear gospel proclamation. Those who have submitted comments pleading for a more contemporary worship style have often explained that they are concerned about active and joyful participation. Even if those people come to different conclusions about the best style for worship, everyone would advocate clear gospel proclamation and active, heartfelt participation as key characteristics of worship.

Christian author Timothy Keller has lamented, "A shortcoming of our current society is we don't reason with the other side, we only denounce. Where is the space to do this?" May the space he asks for be found within our churches, schools, and homes.

Second, whether they realize it or not, those whose opinions are sharply divided have one important thing in common. Neither wants a hymn to be excluded from worship simply on the basis of when it was written. One person thinks a hymn should not be excluded simply because it's old. Another thinks a hymn should not be excluded simply because it's new.

However, there's a flipside to that. If a hymn should not be excluded from worship simply on the basis of when it was written, neither should it be included in worship simply on the basis of when it was written. To let our decisions about music selection be driven by a single factor — whether it be age, origin, or style — would not be wise.

In other words, what everyone is pleading for — or at least ought to be pleading for — is timeless worship. We rightly show tremendous appreciation for the blessings that God has given his Church in the past. The fact that a hymn has remained in use for centuries is a pretty good indication of its quality.

At the same time, it would be foolish to assume that the same God who has blessed the Church with so many gifts for so many years would suddenly stop. In fact, one of the important reasons for continuing to produce new worship resources is that it gives these newer songs an opportunity to go through the same test of time that older songs have gone through and passed.

The original intent of this hymnal is that it would be released around the 500th anniversary of the year Lutherans first started publishing hymnals, 1524. One of those first Lutheran hymnals contained just eight songs. Four of them were written by Martin Luther, but the one for which he's best known ("A Mighty Fortress Is Our God") wouldn't be published for another five years. The great Lutheran hymn writer Paul Gerhardt wouldn't write a single hymn for another century. We can certainly thank God that these early Lutherans were wise enough to continue to allow new gifts from God to his Church to be used in worship. We certainly ask him for the same judicious wisdom he gave to them.

PEOPLE DESIRE TO GROW IN WORSHIP

Finally, it has been encouraging to see how much people care about their personal and public worship. Pastors and worship leaders have responded positively to most of the ideas for how a new hymnal could include features and resources that assist them in their work. The teachers who filled out survey 2 indicated a desire for resources that would enrich their daily classroom and weekly chapel worship.

People have expressed a high interest in continuing to learn more about the biblical principles for worship and the rich heritage of worship that has been handed down to us. They've also responded very positively to possible resources that would aid them in the use of worship resources at home.

In other words, it seems as though very few would say, "My worship life is exactly what it should be. Nothing needs to change or improve."

This, too, comes as no surprise. As we continue to live under sin's curse and in the shadow of our Savior's cross, we fully realize that worship on this side of heaven will always be a work in progress. Some of the challenges facing this hymnal project's committee are unique and new. Others are challenges that Christians have faced for years.

Since a hymnal project is a natural opportunity to think more and talk about worship, the members of the hymnal project look forward to working together with the people of our church body to continue to achieve the growth in worship that we all desire.

As we do so, we thank you for giving us the opportunity to listen. We want you to know that our ears are still open. Finally, we ask for your prayers as we carry out this important work.

Pastor Jonathan Bauer
Chairman, Communications Committee