

Songfest: Challenges for a hymnal committee

by [Adam J. Copeland](#) in the [September 7, 2010](#) issue



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Well, they didn't teach me *that* in seminary." Young pastors sing this refrain when they face situations that seminaries can't anticipate: How do I conduct a memorial service for the preschool's pet guinea pig, which died at the hands of a student? What words should I use after hitting a horrendously embarrassing drive in the men's golf league? How do I politely turn down yet another offer of coffee and cookies on a day full of pastoral visits?

One thing seminary did not prepare me for was the challenge of choosing hymns for worship every week. I agonize over the options and scrutinize many factors. My mind races: What did we sing last week and how well did we sing it? When was the last time the congregation sang this one? This text is strong, but how will they take to the tune? Have we come up with a range of musical styles and eras? What about Mrs. Jones, who loves the old favorites? What about Mr. Jones, who prefers contemporary praise music? Who is the organist this week and will she play on the organ or the piano? What is a young pastor to do?

The struggle to choose the hymns for the small rural congregation I serve is a microcosm of the challenges faced by members of the Presbyterian Committee on Congregational Song (PCOCS) as it decides what hymns and songs to include in the next Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) hymnal and electronic resources.

As PCOCS members know well, the only area of congregational life more likely to raise more hackles than congregational song is the question of the presence and location of the American flag in the sanctuary—and maybe the color of the drapes in the women's parlor. The challenges are immense.

For instance, as the committee wrote in its Theological Vision Statement, every hymnal is a product of its time. Previous hymnals emphasized the cultural and theological context in which they were conceived, but our statement proposes that:

The next Presbyterian collection of hymns and songs . . . will be offered in a world in which trust in human progress has been undermined and eclectic spiritualities often fail to satisfy deep spiritual hungers. It will be used by a church many of whose members have not had lifelong 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.

In response to the challenges of our time, we envision the next Presbyterian collection of hymns and songs as having a clear theme: "God's powerful acts of creation, redemption, and final transformation" and "the human responses that God's gracious acts make possible." For this diverse denomination beset by cultural shifts and internal struggles, the committee is shaping the next PCUSA collection of congregational song with salvation history as its primary framework.

But hundreds of questions remain. For instance, the electronic technology available to the committee brings efficiency to our work but also expands our task. As a committee, we of course exchange frequent e-mails, use Internet-based tools and materials, and even enjoy conversations via video conferencing with experts in congregational song. On the other hand, technology advances so quickly that it is very difficult to plan now for electronic resources that will serve the church in five or ten years.

Furthermore, copyright law has not progressed rapidly enough to keep up with the digital age, and copyright holders vary greatly in their electronic permissions policies. On one hand, it's conceivable—even likely—that some hymns that we want to include will not be available due to Internet permission questions—questions never faced by previous Presbyterian hymnal committees. On the other hand, every

day more and more hymns become available for legal downloading through a variety of Web sites.

The challenges that confront the PCOCS are not limited to those of new technology and our adaptation to it. Consider that when *The Presbyterian Hymnal: Hymns, Songs, and Spiritual Songs* was published in 1990, many old favorites from previous hymnals were included. Many of the hymns that were not carried forward have fallen out of use, and the generation that grew up singing from the 1990 hymnal knows few of those old hymns. But that's not the case for every hymn that was left behind. Some of them have remained very popular and are still well known even though they're not in the 1990 hymnal. So like a scientist inspecting several generations of a family tree for an important gene that's been dormant for a generation or two, the committee aims to renew the next collection with wise words/hymns from the past.

To make matters even more complicated, recent years have brought an explosion of new hymn texts. Although some studies show U.S. mainline churches to be declining rapidly, the number of hymn texts and tunes developed in the past 20 years tells a different story. Hymnal committees must sift through thousands of submissions of unpublished works as well as scores and scores of published single-author text collections. The PCOCS is also examining dozens of hymnals published in the United States and abroad in the past 25 years, as well as a flood of songs from the contemporary Christian music movement.

Our committee serves a denomination that sings song to God in more diverse ways than ever before. Though the majority of our congregations use an organ as the primary instrument for leading song, many others sing accompanied by praise bands or pianos augmented by drum sets, keyboards, flutes, djembes (hand drums), handheld percussion instruments, xylophones—you name it. And how about this: recent years have seen both the proliferation of song leaders singing with microphones and loud praise bands and—in other congregations or in the same one—song leaders teaching congregations to sing a cappella with no amplification for the leader whatsoever. Oh what a tangled web we weave for hymnal committees!

A list of challenges would not be complete without addressing the delicate subject of inclusive language for God and the people of God. The PCOCS developed a carefully worded statement on this matter: "A commitment to inclusive language for the people of God reflects the consensus of the church. When it comes to use of

language for God, however, the conversation is still ongoing." The Bible speaks of God in a great variety of ways using deep and rich language, sometimes employing feminine and gender-neutral metaphors, yet in most of its imagery referring to a masculine God.

As with most complex issues, the question of language for God is not only difficult to speak of in general but also vexing when dealing with hymn texts, especially well-known and beloved ones. The committee's goal for the collection as a whole is to employ "metaphors [for God] that are comfortable in their familiarity and those that are enriching in their newness." The committee is seeking a balanced resource for congregations, a collection with a significant number of traditional hymns and songs alongside others with gender-neutral or expansive language in referring to God.

Since the history of salvation is not confined to one language or country, part of achieving this balance entails including songs from around the world. As the committee writes, "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)." To sing hymns and songs drawn from one's native culture is well and good, but raising one's voice with the saints from other lands lends depths to our faith and augments the praise to a God who is God of every land and nation.

Had I been serving a congregation as pastor when I applied to serve on the PCOCS, perhaps I would have better anticipated the challenging questions that the committee faces. As it is, each time I choose the hymns to be used in worship in my congregation I'm overwhelmed by the many possibilities and perspectives. That's when I lean back in my office chair and smile. They didn't teach me this in seminary, I remind myself. But seminary gave me plenty of resources on how to pray for guidance. It taught me salvation history and it grounded me in the Bible, which calls us to "sing a new song to the Lord." This is a challenge to relish.