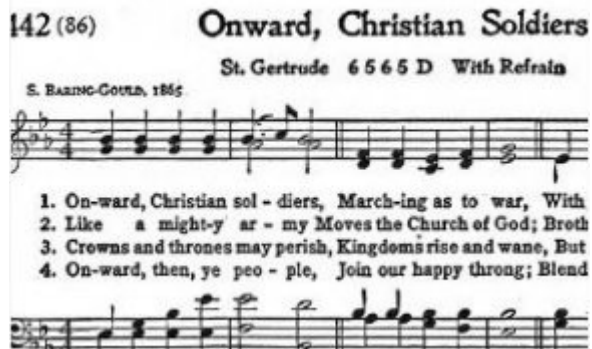


The absurd in worship

by [Thomas G. Long](#) in the [August 22, 2012](#) issue



The publishing house of my denomination, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), will soon issue a promising new hymnal. Naturally the hymns had to pass theological muster, but the range of styles and themes in this collection is wide—newer hymns, global music, praise songs, spirituals, Taizé melodies and rousing old favorites. And once again, for the third hymnal in a row, Presbyterians will not find “Onward Christian Soldiers” in the mix.

Good riddance. This hymn, with its “hut-two-three-four” tune and its warring call for Christians to raise the battle flag, has long outlived its usefulness. Recently, one of my friends threatened to resign her role as church school assistant because the lead teacher insisted on having the children sing, “Christ the royal Master, leads against the foe. Forward into battle, see his banners go!” I stand with my friend.

Years ago, when the hymn was first excised from our repertoire, there was controversy over it, but that has mostly disappeared. In a world grown weary of religious strife, a world where the word *crusade* arouses more anger and embarrassment than resolve, few are nostalgic for a hymn that celebrates Christian soldiers marching to war.

Which is why I was surprised recently to find myself suddenly weepy as we sang “Onward Christian Soldiers” in worship. It was in the little Methodist church just down the lane from our summer home in rural Maryland. The nearest Presbyterian church is miles away, so my wife and I have become seasonal Methodists. Our parish is the smallest congregation in a tiny three-point charge, and there are about two

dozen of us there on a good Sunday. This church was once a gathering place for a vibrant farming and fishing community, a place of summer revivals and ice cream socials, a place to chat under the live oak trees and maybe find a spouse. Now the congregation is aging, and each funeral brings yet another aching emptiness to once-filled pews.

But the congregation makes up in love and hospitality for what it lacks in membership and resources. When it comes to worship, the congregation—like a good country cook—pulls together what is in the cupboard. An elderly saint plays the piano if her glaucoma isn't too bad. On one Sunday someone squeezed out "Blessed Assurance" on an accordion; on another Sunday, a woman braced a harmonica against the handlebar of her motorized wheelchair and lovingly played "She'll Be Coming Round the Mountain." Evensong at St. Thomas Church in New York couldn't have been more reverent.

When I realized that "Onward Christian Soldiers" was our opening hymn a few weeks ago, I groaned. But then we sang it, all 20 of us. The irony of the moment caught me off guard. There we were, most of us graying, some infirm, a hearing aid or two whistling in the background, singing, "Like a mighty army moves the church of God." If it hadn't been worship, I might have laughed out loud. Instead I teared up. There we were, a gaggle of Methodists and their two Presbyterian interlopers singing, "We are not divided, all one body we," just after both of our communions had held rancorous, divisive denominational meetings.

There was a gospel truth here. Only in a place like this—a place where "Onward Christian Soldiers" was not a display of militarism but just patently ridiculous—could that hymn speak truth. Faithful worship is deeply ironic. Instead of the words "Enter to Worship, Depart to Serve," perhaps our bulletins should say, "Warning: Every word of the service to follow is absurd, to be uttered only in faith." "I believe in the holy catholic church"? Absurd. "Praise God from whom all blessings flow"? Absurd. "Like a mighty army, moves the church of God"? You must be kidding.

If the church loses this sense of absurdity and starts believing it really is some kind of army with sufficient strength to swat down our enemies and exert our will, then our worship becomes idolatry and our life demonic. But when we realize that what we say in worship can be true only in the improbable reign of God, we regain our souls and sound the trumpet, this time for an army that marshals no troops but the frail saints, bears no arms but the sword of the Spirit, makes no advance except that

of love and has no enemy but that which undermines God's hope for human flourishing.

Buried in the graveyard of that little Maryland church are Civil War veterans, both Union and Confederate. Next summer marks the 150th anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg. I hope we'll celebrate by remembering Ken Burns's retelling of the 50th reunion at Gettysburg in 1913. There aged Confederates reenacted Pickett's charge, limping across the field toward their old foe. The Union veterans scrambled over the battlements to meet the coming charge, but this time they embraced them with words of tenderness, reconciliation and love. When we hear that story, we glimpse something of what it means for soldiers of the cross to go on the march.