



There Is Room in the Choir Hymn selection criteria and variety

By Aaron Christie

Every fall throughout my ministry, it has interested me to see who would come out of the woodwork to join the choir and who would continue to opt for a pew downstairs. A musician in my first parish was a *National Endowment for the Arts* scholar. He received that prestigious award to study jazz at New York City University. He never missed church, but his gigs often kept him up to the wee hours of the morning—ensuring a late service attendance. Consequently, the most musically gifted man in the parish never joined the choir.

A quiet, private woman with a thick Spanish accent from Guatemala did. Her background was not in jazz, but in costume design. She was never at the center of conversations in the commons. But in the soprano section, she sang Bach, Getty, and Gerhardt with all her heart. A man with a post-doctoral degree in organic chemistry joined too. He sang bass. His profession was pharmaceuticals. His passion was singing. A hard-working delivery driver usually sat next to him. The choir was always a fascinating blend of the family of believers—young and old, white and blue-collar, life-long WELS, and brand new to the faith. There is room in the choir for all of these people and more!

This cross-section of the faithful on earth is a miniscule, yet precious, sample of the heavenly choir. There, the music will always be in tune. There, the labor of long days and longer nights will not keep us away. There, the harmony will be perfection—a symphony of praise to the Savior: “Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing: “To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, forever and ever!” To quote the Christmas hymn, “Oh, that we were there!”

Do you ever wonder what that will sound like? Everyone dreams of heaven just a little differently. What will it look like? What will our reunion with loved ones be like? What will our bodies be like once they are unchained from the shackles of sin and decay? For

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me, I often dream about the sound. This comprehensive, heavenly music, what style will it be? Will we recognize it? Scripture obviously does not give us the answer. What it does give us, however, is a template—of sorts—for what the Church’s music can strive to be on earth: Comprehensive in scope, Christ-centered in content.

Think of our new hymnal as a “choir” of sorts. Specifically, a choir that has 683 members. Unlike an eager choir of musical novices, each and every member of this choir had to pass a rigorous tryout with at least six separate stages of text and tune analysis and development. 15,000 hymns tried out for a seat in the ensemble. 683 made the cut. Why such an exacting process? Because scriptural truth and stewardship of musical treasure demand a bar that is deliberately set high. This choir, after all, will sing, teach, and impart Christian truth to the Church! It will do so for hundreds of thousands of people, in thousands of weekly services, in dozens of countries, states, and territories, over the next thirty years.

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These rigorous standards for membership in the choir were already embedded in the Hymnody Committee's "Hymn Criteria List" that was unanimously adopted by the Executive Committee and guided hymn tryouts for the next five years. To be included, a hymn must...

1. be Christocentric.
2. be in harmony with the scriptural faith as confessed in the Lutheran Book of Concord. (Especially, but not restricted to, means of grace focus, justification centered, law/gospel dichotomy, receptive view of worship, proclamatory/didactic function of hymnody, etc.)
5. be superlative examples of their genre in regard to both textual content and musical craft.

An exceptional choir is made up of top-shelf talent. Many members of the choir may indeed be—in and of themselves—musical standouts. But a choir of musical standouts is a choir that will quickly stand out as unpleasant to listen to! A choir is not a choir of soloists doing their own thing. A choir seeks blend and balance across all members and sections. The many seek to present themselves as a united voice.

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So too, our hymnal is a book for the many—not just the standout musicians of the congregation who are usually called upon to sing the solos. It is meant not primarily for the members of a band, but for the band of believers that sit in the pews of the church, the desks of a classroom, and the comfy chairs of the living room. Many of the members of our new hymnal's choir are profound theologians, but they won't wow you with esoteric knowledge that is meaningless to most. Many of these hymns have sung in



the grandest buildings of Christendom, but they will never refuse an opportunity to sing at bedsides and sickbeds too! The members of our new hymnal's choir are not musical specialists. Their pictures are not hanging on the wall of a museum. Instead, they have been sung by multitudes of God's people over the years and, therefore, the hymnody committee is convinced, will continue to be sung by multitudes for years to come. (This assumes, of course, leaders and parents willing to invest the effort to teach them to members and children!)

That's why your hymnody committee spent six years of their lives painstakingly looking for hymns that would...

6. be accessible and meaningful for God's people at worship in both public and private settings.
7. be useful for those who preach and teach the faith.
8. be part of a corpus that will find wide acceptance by the vast majority of our fellowship.

A good choir has a certain knack for singing a wide repertory of music—and does so convincingly. Thirty years ago, I had the experience of sitting in on a rehearsal for a community choir in Annweiler, Germany. They sang the songs of their homeland in a wonderful way. I smiled hard, however, when they began to sing a spiritual, "Hush. Hush. Somebody's callin' my name." Buxtehude himself could not have sung it more squarely! But they tried. But as they sang, a little bit of our American experience was experienced in the rolling woods of the German Palatinate, and the audience loved it.

The choir of our new hymnal has been very deliberate in casting a wide net for members that are our very own from Lutheranism's heartland and members that will become our very own from around the world. Looking back, several more of Paul Gerhardt's children will be in the choir. Looking forward, many hymns by newer talents from Getty Music will sing as well. The new choir will sing the seasons of Christ's life that are unfolded in the seasons of the church year with a distinct expertise. We will hear much that resonates with the various seasons of our lives. It is impossible for one book to be a one-stop resource for every ethnicity and culture. But the law of Christian love and the doctrine of the holy Christian church caused us to be deliberately inclusive of the nations, tribes, people, and languages with whom we will sing in the heavenly choir.

That's why we invested thousands of hours of time and effort in recruiting choir members that would...

3. be rooted in the Church year with its emphases on the life of Christ and the Christian's life in Christ.
4. be drawn from classic Lutheran sources and deliberately inclusive of the Church's broader song (including so-called international or global music).

The choir in my first parish was a wonderful cross section of the congregation, which, in turn, was a good representation of our community. Demographics are of interest to church leaders as they

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make plans to find the lost and strengthen the found. What do the demographics of the hymnal choir look like? They look much like a church that is both deliberately rooted *and* reaching.

An important group of hymns that predate the Lutheran Reformation serve as an important reminder that we are no cult! We are a continuation of the one, holy Christian and apostolic Church. It may be of interest to know that the ancient hymn, “O, Come, O, Come, Emmanuel” was the most sung hymn in WELS in our data. Not surprisingly, a significant number of the members in the hymnal choir sing with a decidedly German accent. WELS members will be pleased to hear that we invested significant effort into helping our German friends improve their English by means of fresh translations! When appropriate, we also dressed some of them up in a tune that was a little less continental.

Germany fought two world wars with the English and Americans. But in the hymnal choir, they all get along wonderfully well. The hymns of England and America are well-represented. Almost 100 members come from the British Isles. They come from soaring cathedrals and pleasant meadows. Roughly 50 members sing not the Queen’s English but with an American accent. Our American experience—folk, revival, and spiritual—is well-represented.

Our hymnal choir is well-represented by the elderly members that we love and cherish! But what is different about this choir is the number of youth that have joined! The Hymns Committee gave tryouts to literally hundreds of hymns and contemporary songs with a fresh, modern sound. “Fresh,” “young,” “contemporary,” and “modern” are words that mean many different things to different people. No matter what your definition, as you page through the hymnal, you will notice about 10% of the faces will fall into those categories. They have not yet stood the test of time. But they have been properly vetted. Their talent holds promise for a long and fruitful future. It is our hope that Gerhardt and Getty will make beautiful harmony in the choir for years to come.

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Rounding out the membership in the choir, one sees faces from the Islands, Africa, and Latin America. They hold an important place in the choir. Their inclusion will help us all remember that vision of heaven’s choir—a vision that is desperately needed in an age where racial harmony has often spiraled into a sinful cacophony! We are all members of the body of Christ. If for only that reason, they need to be represented in this hymnbook.

This brief demographic survey shows that we have a hymnal that is decidedly rooted in the Lutheran tradition, but is certainly trending younger and younger. This has always been the Lutheran Church’s way!



Perhaps the best way, however, to get to know a choir is to stop talking about the different members and simply listen to them sing. We will get to know this choir best by attending a concert or two. So what’s on the program? A useful program has been compiled titled, *Christian Worship: Hymn Preview*. (See the sidebar.) This preview highlights 54 hymns. Each of these hymns illustrate the concepts that led to inclusion in the choir. It is a program that will be certain to impress, no matter what expectations you bring with you.

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Take some quality time to read or even sing the preview in its entirety. You can’t judge a book by its cover, nor should you. You certainly shouldn’t judge a book based upon what other people have said. Experience the hymns for yourself, lots of them. Experience them with an open mind and open ears. Let your preview serve as a prelude to a renewed appreciation for, fascination with, and commitment to Christian hymnody. You might sit down at this concert thinking you will just experience a choir. Instead, you will become immersed in the gospel of Jesus Christ in all of its multifaceted beauty!

Page through the preview. Look at all the hymns—each of them is unique. “Lift Up Your Heads” has gone on a diet and looks lovely in her new tune. “Dawning Light of Our Salvation” is one of the younger members of the choir. Her composers were youth confirmation age when our current hymnal was published in 1993. “Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus” sings in a section with about 22 other American folk tunes. (Spoiler alert: “Thou” is not an accident in her title. A careful read will reveal a bit of bias in

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bringing back some thee's and thou's in the "new" hymnal. This choice reflects common usage among American Christians in 2020.) In the Christmas section, can you hear some familiar carols that weren't part of the CW93 choir? The preview contains a carol from Poland ("Infant Holy, Infant Lowly"), one from England ("God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen"), and one from France ("Love Has Come"). Finally, a member with a widely-recorded voice rounds out the Christmas section, "Joy Has Dawned" by Getty and Townend. In just these first several hymns, one already sees a Christ-centered cross-section of old and new from the Old World as well as the New.

And WELS will be blessed. Grandmas and grandpas will be blessed as they continue to sing their old favorites and teach them to their children's children. The children will be blessed by a gospel heritage in song that has now come to them. The 683 singers in CW21 will be with us for thirty years. How wonderful to know that they will gladly serve as they always have: spreading the good news, teaching the truth that sets us free, inviting the lost, strengthening the found, encouraging the living, and comforting the dying. Until...

Until we join the hosts that cry,
 "Hosanna to the Lord most high."
 Then in the light of that blest place
 We shall behold you face to face. (CW93 230:3)



More New Hymnal Information

Several new items are available at christianworship.com. A new article under the Resources link, What's New, gives quick access to all the new content. *Christian Worship: Hymn Preview* shares 54 of the approximately 200 new hymns planned for the new hymnal. Each hymn is accompanied by a brief comment on its origin, spiritual meaning, usage in the wider Christian church, or other interesting detail. Some samples from *Christian Worship: Accompaniment for Hymns* are included—options for both piano and organ. *CW: Hymn Preview* is available only as a viewable (not printable) PDF. This is due to restrictions placed by copyright holders.

The following chart shows the new items available.

<i>CW: Hymn Preview</i>	54 hymns with comments, as described above.
Hymn lists	A comprehensive list of 683 hymns and liturgical songs from both the pew edition and <i>CW: Service Builder</i> . Available in three formats: Excel, RTF, and PDF. The list is tentative, pending copyright permissions.
There is Room in the Choir	This issue of <i>Worship the Lord</i> is also available online.
A Liturgical Philosophy for <i>Christian Worship</i>	This article by Prof. James Tiefel is from the forthcoming <i>Christian Worship: Foundations</i> , a companion volume to the new hymnal. This volume is a pastor's manual that provides rationale for the services in the new hymnal. It will appear in a forthcoming issue of <i>Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly</i> .
"For Us and for Our Salvation, ... He Became Truly Human" (The Translation of the Nicene Creed in <i>Christian Worship</i>)	In this article Pres. Earle Treptow offers an explanation for the wording of the Creed. This is a preliminary draft of an article that will appear in a forthcoming issue of <i>Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly</i> .