

OPEN LETTER TO THE NEW WORSHIP HYMN RESOURCES OF THE ELCA

December 19, 2003

The New Worship Resources Committee
The ELCA
Chicago IL

Dear Friends,

After some reflection on the new worship resources, especially the *Renewing Worship Songbook*, I have come to some conclusions that I am sharing with your committee in the following letter. Because what I say will be of interest to others who also are considering these issues, I will make this letter available to the wider church in various ways, most especially by posting it on my website www.ggrindal.luthersem.edu. Others also may post it on theirs.

First I need to say that I appreciate the amount of work it is to compile a new hymnal, and am thankful for this chance to respond to your work. The work of compiling a new hymnal is a large one, and deserves the attention of the entire church. We Lutherans are shaped as much by our hymns as we are by Scripture and the confessions. Changing the words in a hymn can disrupt a person's relationship with Jesus Christ, as you note in your Principle of Worship L-14, "The language of worship nourishes the memory of the community and the individual." I hope you have held this value before you as you have edited, revised and chosen new materials for inclusion in a new hymnal. A church body in the process of putting together such a resource has the responsibility to consult widely throughout the church in order to make sure that the hymnal is representative of the various traditions of that church, especially one like the ELCA, which is the product of many previous church bodies, from many different traditions and pieties. The hymnal needs to include a wide variety of hymns and songs in order to nurture these traditions. As a veteran of the Hymn Text Committee of the LBW, I make the following comments in the hope that this new hymnal will be more broadly inclusive of the various traditions of the ELCA than either the SBH or the LBW.

1. **Accessing the wisdom of the past**—My first concern is: how much has the committee done to garner wisdom from previous hymnal committees? The work I have seen thus far shows the committee to be unaware of the decisions and conversations involved in the preparation of the LBW. Accessing the experience and wisdom of some of the participants on the Hymn Text Committee in the preparation of the LBW, such as Gil Doan, Edward Hansen, Jaroslov Vajda, would have been helpful to you as you worked on this resource. I did speak privately with Susan Palo Cherwien, who resigned from the committee shortly after she spoke with me, leaving me in doubt as to how much of my insights got to the committee. I have spoken with your chair at some length about my own work, but that is not the same as your committee having a sustained conversation with your predecessors. Gil Doan, the head of the Hymn Text Committee of the LBW, would have given you a frank and, I think you would find, surprising evaluation of that process, not all of it complimentary to the LBW. Without a formal conversation with members of the Hymn Text Committee of the LBW, your work appears to me to be an uninformed reaction to the LBW and its heavy use of German chorales, translations of old classic hymns, and its use of inclusive language, rather than a sober reflection on what was good and bad in it. For instance your returning to older translations of "Wake Awake" is a direct reaction to the contemporary translations in the LBW. You would have profited from a conversation with the LBW committee on these issues.

2. **Contradictions between principles**—There is a strange contradiction between your revising of any text that uses masculine pronouns for God, such as the changes in classic and beloved texts such as "Praise to the Lord" ("Sing Praise to God, who has shaped and sustains all Creation") and "All Creatures of our God and King" ("All Creatures of our God Most High") and your decision to return to old, archaic translations of other texts, such as "Behold a Host Arrayed in White." Among the more puzzling revisions are your two proposed versions of "Praise to the Lord," for example. The new translations subvert our

shared memory of a hymn that is well known to many because of the fine choral anthem version of it by F. Melius Christiansen. The one translation by Madeleine Forell Marshall is really a new hymn entirely:

“Sing Praise to God, who has shaped and sustains all creation!
Sing praise, my soul, in profound and complete adoration!
Gladsome rejoice, [what does this mean in English? How about “Gladly rejoice.]
Organ and trumpet and voice,
Joining God’s great congregation.

Praise God, our guardian, who lovingly offers correction,
Who, as on eagle’s wings, saves us from sinful dejection.
Have you observed,
How we are always preserved
By God’s parental affection?”

If this version is chosen, I would suggest including the original translation by Catherine Winkworth, and representing them as two completely different hymns.

3. Inclusive language for God—Your committee has determined, without much consultation beyond certain theologians who represent only one perspective on the notion, that the language for God must be “inclusive.” The theological issues behind this do not seem to have been fully explored for their consequences to the life of faith. I see no one on the consulting committees with the theological stature to make a persuasive argument against the predominant view expressed in the *Principles of Worship* that the language for God should be changed. The changes that have been made too often are not without their own theological problems. Creator does not equal father, as your revisions frequently assume. Modalism, an old heresy that confuses functions with names for God, appears frequently in revisions that substitute “Creator” for “Father” or other masculine words such as “King.” “God,” used frequently as a substitute for “Lord,” leaves one in doubt about which god the hymn is addressed to. While I agreed with the need to change the language for human beings in the LBW to include both men and women, I have never been persuaded that the language for God must be changed in old texts. The battle over the sex of God, to my mind, was concluded in 1986 with the book of Donald Bloesch, *The Battle Over the Trinity*. His warnings to the Methodist hymnal committee that the changes were effecting subtle, but clear changes in our Christian faith, brought their efforts to change every pronoun for God to a halt. Your committee is quite out of touch with the church on these issues. Theological communities do not speak with one voice on this issue. While it is known that one can be shamed in some communities for referring to God in the masculine, this issue usually disappears in the congregation. You need to rethink this question beyond the idea in your Principle L-8F, “Many people find exclusively masculine language for God a serious deterrent to their worship.” One could argue the other side as easily: “Many people find the revision of old texts and clumsy changes in the pronouns for God serious deterrents to their worship.”

4. The core hymnal in the minds of the committee—In contradiction to the complete overhaul of a favorite hymn such as “Praise to the Lord,” your proposal to return to the antique and fustian translation of “Behold a Host” from the Missouri Synod’s *Lutheran Hymnal* of 1941, rather than the one in the *Lutheran Hymnary* (1912), the *Concordia* 1934, or even the *Service Book and Hymnal* seems bizarre. If you are going to use an “older” translation of a Dano-Norwegian hymn it should be one most familiar to Danish or Norwegian-Americans. Your committee’s preference for Missouri’s translation indicates a curious reluctance to consider the rich collection of hymnals in the Dano-Norwegian hymnody in this country, (*The Lutheran Hymnary* 1912, *The Concordia* 1932, the *Hymnal for Church and Home* 1928, etc. Most people who happen to remember this hymn know it either in the SBH or in the LBW version, and they will be confused by the older version, especially if it is not from the Norwegian hymnal translations, which are much less antique than the one you are proposing. Using the Missouri Synod’s version assumes, without warrant, that there are more people in the ELCA with roots in the Missouri Synod than the ALC. where the Norwegian tradition ended up. It is, however, not only with the Dano-Norwegian materials where this preference is expressed. A close look at your retranslations of texts from

the LBW reveals your prejudice in favor of translations from the old Missouri hymnal, rather than the SBH. A case in point is the new proposed translation of Nicolai's chorale "Wake, Awake." Returning to translations from Missouri's *Hymnal* of 1941 is not well advised. There are many other hymnals venerated by the members of the ELCA that deserve consulting. If you are going to use the work of older hymnals, why not return to the admirable work of *The American Lutheran Hymnal* of 1930, done by the old, old ALC? More people in the ELCA grew up with that hymnal, or the SBH and LBW than the *Lutheran Hymnal* of 1941. Most people considered the dominance of Missouri's influence on the LBW to have been a mistake. I would caution the committee against using Missouri's 1941 hymnal as its core hymnal.

5. The quality of the poetry—I am also troubled by the quality of the translations by some of the members of your committee. A good example is this reworking of the Agnus Dei.

"O Lamb of God, you bear the sin of all the world away
You offered death our lives to save: have mercy now, we pray

The inversion of the first line is made in order to rhyme "away" with "pray." It is not the way we speak English, however. The second line is inverted for no reason. It could easily read "you died to save us from our sins, have mercy, now, we pray." (Theologically the line is also problematic: Jesus not only offered to die, he really died.) Letting the form of the poem defeat the poet so obviously is unfortunate. Such work should not receive the imprimatur of the new ELCA hymnal. Contemporary hymnody should try to be at least as good as the poetry of the day. Those who say rhyme is dead haven't heard much rap poetry of late.

6. Scholarship—On another front, one of the best things the LBW hymn text editorial committee did was its scholarship. When we were editing hymns for inclusion in the LBW we obtained a copy of each hymn in its original language, along with the many recensions and translations that appeared throughout the history of Lutheran hymnals in this country. (Our one failure was the failure to use Grundtvig's version of "O Day Full of Grace," which happened because the wrong original version had been given to us by someone who did not know the Danish.) This made it possible for us to understand which version had been used by what tradition and which version might be the more well known in the new hymnal. I have good reason to believe that your committee has not engaged in such careful scholarship. I use as an example the way your committee treated my own hymn "Come, Share the Spirit." When I wrote the text, I used a meter that was not traditional so that the tune also would be unique. The hymn tune, a neo-Renaissance tune by Paul Weber, did not catch on. Now, when it appears in the *Renewing Worship Songbook*, it has been changed so that it fits with an old German tune. While I have no particular objection to the tune, except that it is from the German tradition rather than the Scandinavian or American traditions—I would like to have been consulted about the textual changes, and the decision to use that tune with my text. It is a violation of courtesy, to say nothing of copyright law, to change a text without the permission of a living writer. To my recollection, no one consulted me about these changes. When I have pressed the committee to explain how the changes were made, it has not been able to tell me. Furthermore, the copyright notice in the new book does not indicate in any way that the text is not my original. This leaves me to conclude that there was not a rigorous, scholarly approach to the editing of the hymns that appear in your work.

7. Redressing the wrongs of the past—The failure of your committee to address almost a century of disdain for Scandinavian hymns in American Lutheran hymnals is disappointing. In the new songbook you have included old English Christmas carols that may have some worth, but failed to use this opportunity to include several of the greatest Christmas carols from Denmark by Hans Adolf Brorson. It is difficult to find better Christmas carols than Brorson's "Mitt Hjerte Altid Vanker" ("My Heart is Filled with Wonder") or "Den yndigste Rose er funden," ("I've Found Now the Fairest of Roses") translations of which I provided to you. If my own translations are the problem, "I've Found Now the Fairest of Roses" is in the *Concordia*, or *The Hymnal for Church and Home*. Brorson is not the only loss you could have redressed. When the SBH committee finished its work, Edward Trail Horn III, a member of the

SBH committee, regretted that the committee had been especially ungracious to the Scandinavian tradition and allowed as how these traditions needed to have better treatment in later hymnals. Henry Horn, his brother, repented on several occasions to me personally for the condescension with which the SBH committee had treated Dano-Norwegian hymnody. Among the worst trespasses of the committee is the way it derided both Thomas Kingo and Magnus Brostrup Landstad for writing didactic hymns.¹ Because members of the committee preferred devotional hymns of the Anglo-Catholic revival, they refused to include many hymns from the Scandinavian traditions. (See my article “Thomas Kingo: Poet of Light” in the latest *Cross Accents*, the magazine of the American Lutheran Church Musicians, to read a fuller account of the treatment these hymns got from the compilers of the SBH).

8. **Parochialism**—The failure of this committee to receive with approval more than two or three hymns from the contemporary hymn explosion in Europe, especially Scandinavia and Finland reveals a parochialism regarding our Lutheran cousins in Europe who still share our common faith. We and they have common roots and their works can be important resources for us. Since 1900, almost no hymns from Lutheran traditions in Europe have crossed the ocean. More of these should be included than those you have in the new songbook. It is good to see a hymn by Svein Ellingsen, but it is not one of his most highly regarded hymns in Scandinavia. You have overlooked other popular Norwegian hymnwriters: Eyvind Skeie, Edvard Hoem, Elias Blix, Olaf Hillestad and Sigurd Lunde. Sweden has produced several fine hymn writers since 1930: Anders Frostenson, Britt G. Hallqvist, Per Härling, and Ylva Eggehorn. Finland’s new hymnwriter, Anne Mari Kaskinen, deserves consideration, along with many others, as does Lisbeth Smedegaard Andersen, one of contemporary Denmark’s most gifted hymnwriter. While Germany has not experienced a similar hymn explosion, the hymn, “Die Nacht ist Vorgesungen” for example, by Jochen Klepper, a victim of the Nazis, is almost a must in contemporary Lutheran hymnals. These people are Lutheran hymn writers who know the tradition of Lutheran hymnody, and who write hymns that speak to moderns. A truly global Lutheran hymnal would include more than three contemporary hymns from our brothers and sisters in the traditional Lutheran lands in Europe.

9. **A change in piety**—The preponderance of hymns about the sacraments and the church year tends to turn Lutheran piety away from the traditional Lutheran hymns that are homiletical and thus assure the singer in the congregation of the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This change began as early as American Lutheran hymnals of the late 19th century (See the preface to the *Church Book* of 1868). The SBH committee included as one of its main goals (which you can read in the preface to the SBH) getting away from homiletical hymns and substituting devotional hymns. The inclusion of so many old German chorales in the LBW stopped that trend for a time, but your committee’s work shows clearly that you have continued the movement with energy. Many of the new hymns contained in the new *Renewing Worship Songbook* continue the trend by giving stage directions for what we are doing in the service, turning our hymns into adorations of the Eucharist or baptismal waters, e.g., RWS 177, “Break now the bread of Christ’s sacrifice: giving thank hungry one. Gather round.” The old plot of a Lutheran chorale, which dwelt on some truth of the Gospel and preached it to the congregation, has been abandoned for meditations on the sacraments. Perhaps the committee has not fully understood this trend, or even marked it, because it has happened subtly, even to me, which is one reason I am disappointed, but not surprised, by the inclusion of my hymn, “Come, Share the Spirit” however butchered, in the new resource. It is too much about what we should do. Another indication that your piety has turned against the Lutheran tradition of evangelical hymn writing is the failure of your committee to include even one of John Ylvisaker’s hymns in your *Renewing Worship Songbook*. His hymns are almost all biblical paraphrases and teach the Gospel as well as any contemporary hymn writer’s today. To reject his work is to reject a major force in contemporary Lutheran hymnody

10. **Hymnals are corporate projects in this country**—A perusal of the people on the various committees shows that you did not include voices of those who disagree with the current liturgical revival. In the former days in this country, Lutheran hymnals were better because they were put together by people who represented the various churches and traditions in America. Since *With One Voice*, the hymnological establishment in the ELCA has been the same group. Most of the names that appear in the preface to WOV are the same as the people who are now on the new resources committee. Furthermore,

no one on the committees knows much about the textual side of hymns or hymnals. Most of you are musicians and know music, but this will be the first time in the history of Lutheran hymnody that a hymnal will be prepared almost exclusively by musicians who do not understand texts as well as they do tunes. This shows in your acceptance of too many new texts written by members of the committees, texts straining to use politically correct language in almost Swineburnian excess.

11. **Musicians**—Likewise, your inclusion of musicians is limited. The Lutheran colleges in the Midwest are rich in fine musicians and composers. They are great teachers of the faith through music, but they are not represented on your committee, nor do they appear to have been consulted. The rap against them has traditionally been that they do not understand liturgy. I think this is an easy way to dismiss their gifts. They are a treasure the Lutheran church has ignored over the years in the preparation of hymnals. This is one more example of the failure of the hymnological experts in the ELCA to access the rich resources of musical expertise highly regarded around the world.

12. **Timing**—Finally, I am worried about the timing of this project. The making of a hymnal is a huge task. It takes lots of work, heaps of money, and no small amount of courage. That the ELCA would embark on this project while it is embroiled in issues on ministry and sexuality is ill advised. Once again, the work was almost all done before the materials were released for comment. And, unfortunately, because this will be voted on in 2005 when the sexuality issue is also before the Assembly, one or the other will receive almost no debate. While your attempts to canvas the church on your project are laudable, they are done in a vacuum, after the materials are printed, making it difficult for people to think of what could be. Anyone can predict how the responses will go. People will like, as I do, the old gospel songs that have been included and will probably overlook what isn't there because they have no idea of what has been left out in the various preceding hymnals over the years. Your processes for considering and introducing the new materials did not include the voices of those who have critical comments to make. Therefore the church will once again be forced to decide on a product it either must accept or reject, without having heard from a variety of voices in the shaping of the work. This creates division and bitterness that would have been much better dealt with before the product appeared. Because you have chosen to include in your deliberations only those who agree with you, you have made yourselves vulnerable to criticisms that a process open from beginning to end would have avoided. This is regrettable and not good for the fragile unity of the ELCA.

Sincerely
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¹ Selmer Berge, Pastor at First Lutheran in Fargo, North Dakota, kept a journal of his work on the early SBH committee. His notes on the issue of including Landstad prove my point. "When I presented "When Sinners See Their Lost Condition" by Landstad it was rejected because 'it was too didactic. Not good as such. Not acceptable to the rest.' As it was Landstad's hymn I insisted it ought to be in. Objection [was] raised because whole plan of Salvation outlined. "The function of a hymn is to express our devotion in church. That is its principal function," one said. I objected stating that hymns are also to serve the church in its work of personal soul winning. Seltzer said, "Services for personal soul winning are not Lutheran. I replied they were. "No," said Seltzer, "they are Methodistic." I said they were Christian. That ended this episode. I also said that if a Hymn book does not contain hymns with the plan of salvation present we could not use it. Seltzer opined that a hymn is the soul's address to God directly or obliquely." Selmer Berge's "Notes on Hymnal Com. At Pittsburgh PA, June 19-21, 1945, p I ii. Luther Seminary Archives. Seltzer is George Rice Seltzer, a Professor of Liturgics at what was then called Mt. Airy Seminary, but is now called Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia.