Finding Words for Worship

A Guide for Leaders

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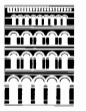

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Finding Words to Sing

Hymns, because they combine words and music and actively engage most of the congregation, are central to worship. In some Protestant churches that give congregations few words to speak, hymns form most of the people's active worship. Hymns cling to the memory through rhyme, rhythm, and melody. A snatch of a hymn can run through a Christian's mind in the midst of routine daily work, a reminder of God's presence. In a time of pain or crisis, a hymn provides comfort or challenge. Then, returning to church on Sunday, members sing with renewed enthusiasm hymns that may have sustained them through the week.

Hymns serve many theological purposes. Many hymns express praise to God. Others petition God for wisdom, strength, or courage; still others pour out honest lament. The great majority of hymns address God directly. Through them, the congregation forms and renews its relationship with God. Some speak in singular voice; for example, "Lord, I Want to Be a Christian," appropriately expresses the commitment of each individual in community. Since hymns are meant for congregational singing, many speak in plural about shared life experiences. For instance, Charles Albert Tindley (1851–1933), an African American Methodist pastor, helped urban Christians express to God their common experience in a hymn that begins: "We are tossed and driven on the restless seas of time."[1] Even hymns in singular voice, however, are sung together; hymns are never purely individualistic, though they may focus on individual faith experience.

Some hymns, such as "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" by

Martin Luther (1483–1546), address not God but humanity. Their theological purpose may be to proclaim who God is, to tell what God does, or to challenge Christians to faithfulness. Not a few begin by witnessing to humanity and end by addressing God; the first stanza of "Lift Every Voice and Sing" asks humans to sing of hope and liberty, while the third stanza addresses God directly.[2]

Hymns express and shape our faith not only through their words but also through their music. Church leaders through the centuries have feared that singers, enchanted by a delightful tune, might miss the meaning of words. Yet texts and tunes can weave together in such a way that the music intensifies meaning. Consider the contrast between the tunes *Passion Chorale,* sung on Good Friday with the text "O Sacred Head Now Wounded," and *Easter Hymn,* sung with the text "Christ the Lord Is Risen Today" on Easter morning. If it were possible to exchange the texts, how poorly the tunes would express the sorrow of Good Friday or the joy of Easter! Tunes are part of the meaning hymns express.

Hymns give voice to faith in cultural forms through the style of both music and words. Singing their faith in the characteristic musical forms of a culture can help people sing more wholeheartedly with a greater depth of feeling. This is true of national and ethnic cultures as well as regional and class subcultures. One congregation listens to country music, another attends classical concerts; different hymns will inspire them. Diverse styles of hymns help diverse congregations express their faith. Worshiping the living God demands the very best forms of the culture or cultures of a worshiping community.

Hymns communicate faith as congregations sing to or about God. Words and music, in forms growing out of human cultures, support one another to convey meaning and join people in a common voice. Hymns are inherently collective; they express the faith of the community singing together. They help a congregation participate actively in worship.

Selecting Hymns

Those who choose hymns for worship have an awesome task—helping people express and grow in their relationship with God and

Christian discipleship. Personal preference, theological training, or aesthetic sensitivity may guide the selection of hymns for congregational singing, but concern for the worship and faith development of communities who sing is also essential.

Concern for the overall integration of worship means that hymns should relate to the themes and scripture texts for the service. This requires that worship planners read the entire hymn text to discover if it is truly appropriate. More than one worship planner has been startled to find that a hymn text develops in a direction not anticipated by the opening line; one phrase that fits the direction of the service is not enough. Consistency in the overall direction of hymn and the overall direction of the service is the goal. Sometimes connections are subtle, but the themes of hymns and worship should not be inconsistent.

Concern for worship means that the words of a hymn should be appropriate to the part of a service in which it appears. Almost any act of worship can be sung, from opening words to prayers to closing blessings. Hymns then should be placed where they belong in the order of service. It is always appropriate to begin worship by praising God in song; a hymn can carry the same content as a call to worship or greeting. The hymn closest to the scripture readings and sermons should be closely related to the directions being explored in preaching. Appropriately worded hymns and congregational responses enhance celebrations of the sacrament. Hymns toward the end of the service anticipate a congregation's going into the world to love God and humanity. A hymn should never interrupt, but rather always continue, the progression of the service in both content and emotional mood.

Obviously, not only words but also tunes convey the meanings and moods of worship, supporting or subverting the progression of a service. An Advent hymn tune might voice expectation; a Lenten hymn tune might articulate the enthusiasm of baptismal commitment or the grief of the cross. A lively hymn of praise might support worship that has a joyful theme, but it might begin a more contemplative service on the wrong note.

Finding hymn texts that fit the themes, texts, and progression of worship requires effort. The scripture and subject indexes of a

hymnal can aid the search for appropriate hymns. If a scripture concordance supplement has been published for the hymnal a congregation uses, it will provide more detailed help. Churches that follow the lectionary and/or church year often will find appropriate hymns in sections of the hymnal or the section of a hymnal index categorized by the church year. Planners can save time by choosing the hymns for a whole season at one sitting. Planning ahead also makes it possible for musicians to prepare preludes or postludes based on one of the hymns for the day.

The task would be forbidding enough if worship planners only needed to consider how the words and tunes of hymns fit into worship. But concern for the congregation's heartfelt participation and their faith development places another set of challenges before the worship planner.

Heartfelt participation is possible when the choice of hymns in a service balances familiarity and challenge. New hymns with challenging tunes need careful introduction, perhaps the first time as an anthem by the choir. For example, the text "Hope of the World," by theologian Georgia Harkness (1891–1974), was perfect for a service I was planning for a church I had just begun serving as interim pastor. Unfortunately, the congregation had never sung the hymn, which was set in their hymnal to a difficult tune they did not know. I had not sought ways to introduce the hymn that would help the congregation become familiar with it, and they rebelled: "Don't *ever* choose that hymn again!"

In general, though, the same congregation would accept one less familiar hymn per service, if they could also sing familiar hymns. The issue at stake is whether worshipers must devote most of their attention to learning new things or whether they have the opportunity to forget themselves and their performance in the act of praising God. Like many congregations who object to unfamiliar hymns, they were not clinging to the past, but insisting that I allow them to participate fully in worship.

One man in the same congregation told me privately after a service, "I wish you would introduce us to more new hymns. Singing the same hymns all the time makes worship less interesting to me." Of course, I was delighted with the support of this adventuresome

member, who was reminding me that fresh hymnody also supports participation in worship. Some worshipers thrive on novelty; too much repetition becomes boring or trite to them. Learning new hymns can help a congregation grow, as people discover new ways to articulate their faith. For most people, gentle and gradual learning, rather than a rush of new material, supports heartfelt participation and spiritual development. Many excellent methods have helped congregations learn new hymns gradually but systematically. The book *Hymns and Their Uses* by James Sydnor outlines a number of them.[3]

Another consideration in choosing hymns is the cultural tradition or diversity of a congregation. Clergy and musicians who come from a different region, class, or denomination than the congregations they serve need humility when choosing hymns, in order to be open to member's preferences rather than to impose supposedly universal aesthetic standards. Some very gifted people dismiss whole categories of hymnody as inferior without taking time to learn about them. Closer study will reveal that hymns of each type—from classical to folk to gospel to contemporary Christian—range greatly in appropriateness for congregational singing.

Accessibility of words and music was the key purpose of evangelical gospel hymns—but that does not mean that profound theological insights and sound composition cannot be found among them. Excellence in composition and poetry has characterized much classical hymnody of the past and present, but not every well-written classical hymn is accessible for congregational singing. Some folk hymns (especially those composed in the 1960s and 1970s) are shapeless melodically, but others are haunting in their simple but engaging form. Similarly, some praise choruses that have become popular recently have engaging, accessible texts and tunes, though they may not be nourishing as the only diet for hymnody.[4] The litany could go on—each musical style offers both riches and pitfalls for congregational song. Worship leaders should listen carefully, therefore, to what congregations prefer singing, seeking sound theology and composition, yet open to the styles the congregation loves. Abstract standards for correct church music lead to insensitivity about local culture. When church leaders combine good training with compassionate listening, they can help congregations broaden their musical tastes without abandoning the hymnody they have come to love. The goal in most congregations should be to incorporate a more diverse hymnody, honoring hymns already loved, while learning new hymns of other styles and cultures. In this way, congregations make room for diversity within the present congregation and among the new members who may join with them in praising and serving God.

Writing New Hymn Texts

The remaining material in this chapter is designed especially for writers of original hymn texts; more technical than most material in the book, it still may help people choose or evaluate hymns. Moreover, almost any hymn-singing Christian might well attempt to write an original hymn once in a lifetime. Some may uncover a hidden gift or a new spiritual discipline. All will gain a new appreciation of hymn text writing, which demands all the discipline and creativity one can muster.

What motivation could one possibly have to write a hymn text, when hundreds of thousands already exist in one's native tongue and when congregations love to sing familiar songs? There are three main reasons: (1) to express the writer's religious devotion; (2) to address a topic not yet addressed in traditional hymnody; or (3) to explore a familiar topic in a new way.

Good hymnody overflows from living a relationship with God. Composer and educator Austin Lovelace argues that the best hymns happen when a person is so full of the love of God that one has no choice but to write hymns, using well-trained gifts: "Great hymns can be created only when poetic gifts and techniques are so developed that God's Spirit can flow through the mind, heart, and hand of a poet-Christian who must sing of God's grace."[5] While some keep journals, others write hymns as a spiritual discipline and later share them in or beyond their worshiping congregation.[6] Other hymns arise spontaneously in a crisis; Scottish poet and pastor George Matheson (1842–1906) wrote "O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go" while in great pain. He said this of its writing:

> It was composed with extreme rapidity; it seemed to me that its construction occupied only a few minutes, and I felt myself rather in the position of one who was being dictated to than of an original artist. I was suffering from extreme mental stress and the hymn was the fruit of that pain.[7]

The hymn text, God's gift for Matheson's healing, has assured many others that divine love embraces them and leads them past grief. This, then, is the first purpose for writing a hymn: to express one's faith and give others the words to express their faith.

A second reason to write hymns is to fill a need in worship not met by hymns readily available. Growing attention to the lectionary and church year has created a void in hymnody. For example, until recently few Protestant churches in the United States celebrated Epiphany. The feast, observed on January 6, celebrates the manifestation of Jesus as the Christ and Word of God through the incarnation, the visitation of the Magi, his baptism by John, and other events early in Jesus' ministry. Churches and hymnal committees have sought hymns for the occasion, since the few good traditional Epiphany hymns emphasize only the coming of the Magi. Now that many denominations use the same lectionary, hymn texts that bring out the themes and images of a particular Sunday meet a need.

The churches' new awareness of areas of ministry and justice calls for new hymns. A hymn I wrote about the church's ministry of healing with persons suffering the wounds of abuse serves a need in healing services and twelve-step groups, among other settings. Hymns of confession, hope, and healing are needed to respond to growing awareness of how humanity is ravaging nature. As the church begins to value women's contributions, hymn-poets tell the stories of women in scripture, church history, and contemporary society. These are just a few topics that rarely have been addressed but that now inspire many new hymn texts.

A third reason to write a hymn text is to sing about a familiar subject in a new way. Psalm 19 proclaims God's work in nature; it has inspired hymns that reflect understandings of creation in various historical periods. Hymn writers play an important role in reshaping inherited ideas and images so that their contemporaries can sing their faith honestly.[8]

Deep experiences of faith and life, unexplored subject matter, and fresh ways of approaching familiar subjects can inspire fresh and useful new hymn texts. Unfortunately, many beginning hymn writers imitate the past, repeating ideas and rearranging phrases of other poets, without trying to uncover what is urging toward expression today. A facility at rhyme and meter is not enough for good hymn-writing; writers also must have something to say that has not been said before in the same way.

Finding the creative voice is of utmost importance in hymnody. Hymns follow a highly structured form, yet their content expresses the love, hope, fear, commitment, and longing of Christians. To be a fitting expression of a congregation's relationship with God, hymn texts must touch the heart and the imagination, melding with music to express praise, lament, thanksgiving, and prayer. No hymn writer can predict what texts will help others express their relationship with God, but a text seldom will speak to others unless it honestly grows out of one's journey with God. Nowhere is beginning in prayer and tapping the imagination more important than with hymn writing, given the many hymns readily available for people to sing.

The creative voice must speak at the depth of a hymn text, however, and not on the surface. A movie I saw recently was flawed by showy camera work that constantly called attention to itself, as if to say, "Isn't this original?" The filmmaker's cleverness distracted from the development of the plot and characters. This kind of originality also is distracting in hymn texts. True originality comes from honest expression of one's perceptions of life and faith. Julia Cameron, whose book *The Artist's Way* has helped many people recover their creative selves, has written "It is the accurate mapping out of our own creative interests that invites the term *original.* We are the *origin* of our art, its homeland. Viewed this way, originality is the process of remaining true to ourselves."[9]

In a hymn that is "original," each word says something one wants to say; nothing is "filler." Originality grows not simply out of individual experience but from a writer's immersion in the life of the church and the world. Originality in hymns is, to a large extent, a matter of context—speaking out of a particular time, place, and community. African American spirituals speak from an oppressive

and life-denying context, melding imagery, musical forms, and confident Christian witness in a unique way. Yet, rooted in a particular context, these hymns speak to Christians around the world, because they express honestly what it means for Christians to affirm life in the face of oppression and death.

The reason to write a hymn text is to express what must be expressed out of our lives and contexts. Otherwise, we will certainly repeat the past. Originality comes as we allow the Spirit of creation to speak through us from within our contexts.

Disciplines of Hymn Text Writing

Writing hymn texts requires disciplines beyond those already discussed because of the challenge of helping congregations sing. Interesting, regular patterns of rhythm and rhyme enable people to sing together. Using rhythm and rhyme is a craft that can be learned, yet which is time-consuming to do well.

The Rhythm of Hymns

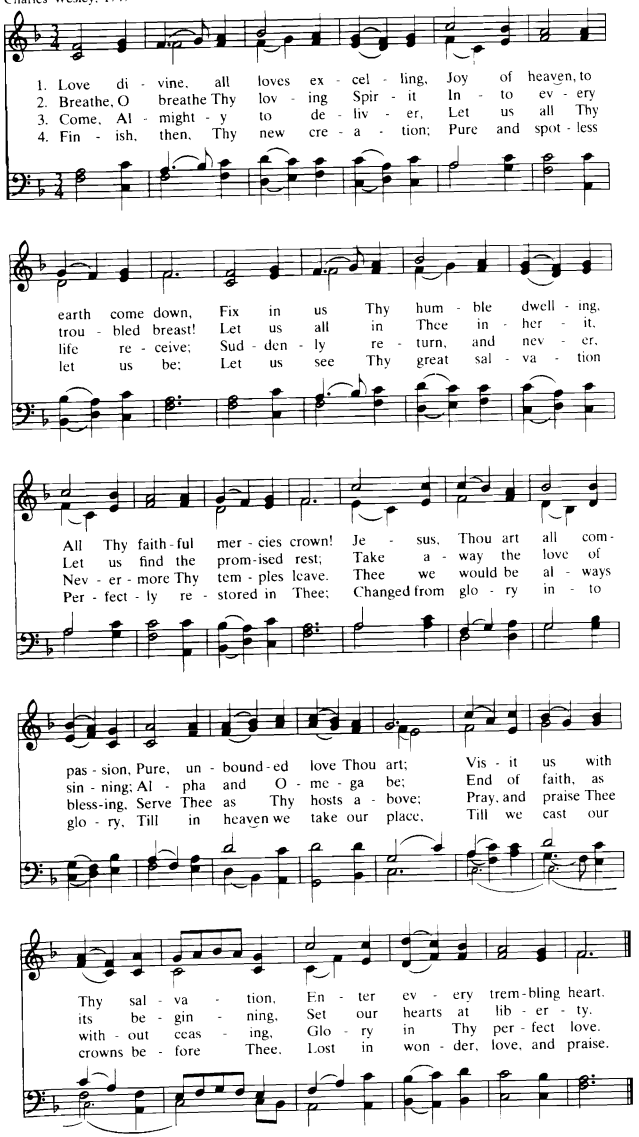
In the back of every hymnal is a metrical index, grouping hymns by their rhythm patterns. In this system, "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling" by Charles Wesley (1707–1788) is listed as 8.7.8.7.D. ("D" means "doubled"; so 8.7.8.7.D. means 8.7.8.7. doubled.) If you are unfamiliar with the system, count the syllables in each line of one stanza of "Love Divine" (see illustration 1). You will discover the first line has eight syllables, and the second line has seven. This pattern is repeated four times. Now find another tune your hymnal lists as 8.7.8.7.D.; you can probably sing "Love Divine" to it.

Several abbreviations in metrical indexes bear explanation; they refer to a few meters that English language hymnody often uses. Common Meter (C.M.) is 8.6.8.6.; an example is ST. ANNE, often sung with "O God, Our Help in Ages Past." C.M.D., which means Common Meter Doubled, is also a popular meter. Short Meter (S.M.) is 6.6.8.6.; an example is DENNIS, often sung with "Blest Be the Tie That Binds." Long Meter (L.M.), often used in early hymns, especially ancient Latin hymns, is 8.8.8.8., exemplified by OLD

Love Divine, All Loves Excelling

HYFRYDOL 8.7.8.7.D

Charles Wesley, 1747 — Rowland Hugh Prichard, 1831



100th, best known as a tune for the Doxology. Hymn tune names are always listed in all capital letters.

Since hymnals contain hymns translated from many languages, indexes list many other meters, some ill-suited to English language rhythms. Yet text writers today often are encouraged to venture into writing in a greater variety of meters, making it possible for composers to compose fresh new tunes. The metrical index can help worship leaders find a familiar tune that will encourage a congregation to sing a new text. It also can help writers identify good tunes for their texts.

Caution is in order. Some tunes convey the wrong feeling for some texts. Further, a congregation must know a tune by memory to sing it to a new text, unless the tune is very easy to learn. It is not wise to ask a congregation to hold a new text in one hand and a hymnal with the tune set with a different text in the other hand! Third, not only the number of syllables but their rhythm must be considered.

The basic building block of rhythm in English language poetry is a "foot," the smallest unit of poetic rhythm: an accented syllable together with one or more unaccented syllables. Four kinds of feet are common in English-language hymn texts: the iamb, the trochee, the anapest, and the dactyl. Iambic feet are feet of two syllables with the second accented: diVINE. Trochaic feet have two syllables with the first accented: WORship. An anapestic foot has three syllables with the third accented: in the NIGHT. A dactylic foot has three syllables with the first accented: CARoling. Lines with the same number of syllables may rely on different kinds of poetic feet. Hymnal indexes list 8.7.8.7. trochaic and 8.7.8.7. iambic separately because iambic and trochaic texts cannot be sung to the same tune. But not even all hymn tunes listed together are truly interchangeable. Variations in tune structure or feeling tone can make a text/tune match awkward or ridiculous; a congregation should never be asked to sing a match that planners have not first tested by singing.

Hymn text writers should attend not only to the number of syllables or the kind of poetic feet but to the contours of tunes. The strongest emphases of text and tune should match. Ordinarily, the first sounded note in a measure is stressed more than other notes.[10]

Words also receive emphasis when sung on longer or higher notes. A verb, noun, or vivid adjective would be more fitting on a long, high note than a word like "in" or "and." In turn, "in" or "and" would be more fitting on an offbeat (not the first beat of a measure), a shorter note, or perhaps a lower note. Also, words with open vowels are better on notes held a long time; they are more melodious and are easier for singers to hold without breathing. Further, one syllable of a hymn text is often sung on more than one note. Recently I wrote a text to the tune PICCARDY, usually matched with "Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence." In the next to the last line, one syllable is sung on four notes. An open vowel sound such as "way" sounds better than a closed sound like "van." It was challenging to find words with open vowels on that measure, but anything else was awkward to sing. Singing the words frequently while writing a hymn text helps match the text and tune.

Following the contours of a tune should not, however, lead text writers away from adhering closely to their chosen rhythm pattern. The place in PICCARDY where one syllable is sung to four notes might tempt a beginning writer to "cheat" on meter, slipping in a two-syllable word instead. Or the writer may notice that the rhythm of "Be Thou My Vision" varies once in the third stanza; the flowing folk rhythm permits "own heart" to be sung on the same two notes that carried "thought" and "on-" in earlier stanzas. The temptation is to vary meter in several places, willy-nilly, making it impossible for the singer to predict how the words will fit the tune. Once a rhythmic pattern has been established, the singer expects it to continue. When a text is set to a familiar tune, the singer expects the new text to have the same rhythm as the well-known text. Deviations in rhythm make a song more difficult to sing; they should be made infrequently if at all. Folk traditions with varied rhythms depend on outstanding song leaders to help congregations follow.

To fit well with a tune, a hymn text should have a similar structure from stanza to stanza. In a poem that would not be sung, one might state something hopeful in the first eight lines, then express an awful challenge in the next eight lines, then resolve to a larger hope in the last eight lines. But consider what a challenge this poses to the composer. How can the same tune express mild hope in one

stanza, fear in the second, and strong hope in the third? Thus, the contrast between hope and threat must be structured into each stanza of a hymn text. Contrast and movement must be structured into each stanza, with the climax of the text matching the climax of the tune.

Slight variations in the rhythmic pattern can make a hymn more interesting. For example, "All People That on Earth Do Dwell" is basically iambic tetrameter (L.M.), but hymn writer and English teacher Gracia Grindal scans it this way:

> ALL PEOP/le/THAT/on EARTH/do DWELL,
> SING TO/the LORD/with CHEER/ful VOICE;
> HIM SERVE/with MIRTH,/his PRAISE/forth TELL;
> COME ye/beFORE/him AND/reJOICE.[11]

Beginning each line with a strong word varies the meter effectively, if OLD HUNDREDTH is sung with long notes at the beginning of each line. Gracia Grindal writes: "While almost anybody can write poetry which is endlessly regular, it takes the ear of the poet to hear when the line should be varied."[12] After reviewing many hymns by beginning writers, however, I would advise beginners to err on the side of regularity, starting with tunes that demand regular rhythm. After developing competent craft, the author may venture to vary rhythm to create interest or to include words one must say. Meticulous rhythm is essential to good hymn-text writing.

The Challenge of Rhyme

Hymns often rhyme. Clement Wood, compiler of a standard rhyming dictionary, has written that "Rhyme is the identity in sound of an accented vowel in a word, usually the last one accented, and of all consonantal and vowel sounds following it; with a difference in the sound of the consonant immediately preceding the accented vowel."[13] Notice the rhymes in stanza 1 of "Love Divine." The rhyming words at the end of eight-beat lines are two-syllable rhymes: "excelling" and "dwelling"; "compassion" and "salvation." The rhyming words at the ends of seven-beat lines are one-syllable rhymes: down/crown, art/heart. The 8.7.8.7.D. meter leads to this pattern, since its poetry is basically iambic, yet all the lines of seven syllables end on a single accented beat. Wesley's rhyme pattern in

each stanza is ababcdcd; that is, the first and third, second and fourth, fifth and seventh, and sixth and eighth lines rhyme. In each stanza, at least one rhyme is imperfect, for example, "compassion" and "salvation" in the first stanza. Nevertheless, Wesley's rhymes give a sense of completion to the lines, which is one purpose of rhyming in hymnody. It is particularly important to end a hymn on a true rhyme to give a sense of completion.

Hymn texts often employ near rhymes of consonance and assonance. "Compassion/salvation" demonstrates consonance, since ending consonants, but not vowels, rhyme. Wesley ends "Love Divine" with assonance ("place/praise"), not a true rhyme; only the vowels rhyme, though the consonants nearly rhyme. Although Wood declares that "rhyme deals exclusively with sounds, and has nothing to do with spelling,"[14] visual rhymes (in which words such as "move/love" end with the same letters, *pronounced* differently) are not unusual in hymn texts. Hymn text writers sometimes only rhyme alternate lines, for example, rhyming only the seven-beat lines with HYFRYDOL, so that the pattern could be diagrammed: xaxaxbxb (with x representing an unrhymed line).

Rhyme is not generally in favor in secular poetry today, and not everyone agrees that rhyme is important in hymn writing. Lovelace encourages exact rhyming in every line,[15] whereas Grindal prefers near rhymes to trite ones. Recent hymn texts sometimes rhyme minimally (through assonance, consonance, visual rhymes, or infrequent rhymes), if at all.

The most important discipline of rhyming, given these many options, is to use great care in word choice, never using one word simply to rhyme with another. It is better to not rhyme or to use near rhymes than to use trite rhymes that do not really say what one wants to say. Wood lists some hackneyed rhymes:

> kiss, bliss.
> yearn, burn; yearning, burning.
> love, dove, above.
> fire, desire.
> trees, breeze.[16]

Except for "kiss/bliss," these rhymes appear fairly frequently in hymns, perhaps showing that some things too trite to say can be

sung. Still, the text writer should seek varied, interesting rhymes. Rhyming should never lead to archaisms, such as using "trod" to rhyme with "God," or "unfurled" to rhyme with "world." Rhyming words should stay within the rhetoric or literary tone of the text, or the effect will be ridiculous:

> All praise to our almighty God
> who loves us whether straight or mod.[17]

Singers should not be able to guess which rhyming word was chosen first; each rhyming word should be essential to the meaning.

Hymn text writing requires the greatest discipline so that rhythm and rhyme support, rather than subvert, the writer's purpose. Thus, a rough draft may consume only a few minutes, but a finished hymn text may require at least four or five hours at several sittings to be worthy of congregational song. Sloppy word choice distracts the singer from communicating the heart's faith and praise. The goal is not poetic eloquence for its own sake, but words so natural and true that they convey the religious conviction of the singer.

Poetic Devices

Hymn writers use poetic devices such as alliteration, assonance, and imagery. Alliteration is the use of several adjacent or close-by words that begin with the same consonant. Assonance, the use of similar sounds, especially vowels, is used not only to rhyme but to enhance the sound within a line. Hymn writers use imagery most of all; they speak by word-pictures such as metaphors, similes, and descriptions of narrative or sense reality. These and other poetic devices either enhance the quality of sound or call on the imagination to express the experience of faith.

Address is part of the poetry of hymns. For example, a hymn may use personification, addressing the cross as if it were a person. Some texts, such as the last four stanzas of "How Firm a Foundation," speak in the voice of God. Hymns most commonly address God or humanity, as noted above. Others first speak to humanity, then God, requiring the writer to take care with transitions. Whoever is addressed, the hymn writer should remember that the task is to help people voice their religious experience; hymns that are, in

fact, sermons are not easily used in worship. Most hymns should express the believer's relationship with God, either as a direct address to God (in praise, prayer, or lament) or as a witness to the community.

The Tools of Hymn Text Writing

Beyond computer or pencil and paper (or anything that allows for much editing), other tools are invaluable for hymn writing. A rhyming dictionary saves time and can locate an elusive rhyme. A thesaurus identifies words that convey one's intended meaning, yet fit the rhyme and rhythm scheme. A Bible grounds texts in the church's common language. A collection of hymnals offers a great variety of tunes to fit the mood and meter of texts. Such tools support disciplined hymn text writing.

Hymn Text Writing: One Writer's Process

People are often curious how someone moves from an idea to a completed hymn text. Writers proceed in a variety of ways, so here I can describe only my process.

The idea for a hymn comes in several ways. A friend or a church will ask me to write a hymn for a special occasion. At other times, my life experiences spark ideas. Sometimes a tune will move me to write a text and suggest its subject matter. Usually I spend some time brainstorming and focusing.

My next movement toward writing a hymn text is to make a rough draft of what I want to say, perhaps including a central image. Except when a tune has inspired the text, I must then choose a rhythm in one of several ways. I may follow the rhythm of the first line, if it is well developed. Or, since some rhythms dance, some mourn, and others are stately and dignified, the feeling of the text may suggest a meter; then I search for a tune of that meter.[18] At other times, the words may remind me of an existing tune or a new tune. When I create text and tune together, I move back and forth between text and tune several times to find a regular rhythm to support congregational singing.

I prefer always to use rhyme in a hymn, perhaps only in every

other line; I strive toward true rhymes. It is worth reworking or discarding a line, though not one's ideas, so that every rhyming word matters.

I usually spend two or three hours in the first composition of a text, singing each stanza several times to check the rhythm. Later, I spend considerable time revising it at separate sittings. Feedback from other writers or from the first people who sing the hymn helps me identify problems to correct.[19]

Summary

It is an awesome thing to write or select words that Christians will sing to God, for singing involves words and music, and it calls forth thoughts and feelings, memories and hopes. Writing or choosing hymns demands one's very best, for hymns are a vehicle for Christian praise, prayer, lament, commitment, and witness. When well-matched with a tune, words find wings as body, heart, mind, and soul unite in responding to God's grace.

9

Bringing It All Together

Integrating the parts of worship involves both aesthetic sensibility and disciplined creativity.

One service I attended was based around the story of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4. As they entered the sanctuary, worshipers already began to focus on the theme through bulletins that interpreted the story visually. Following a brief call to worship and hymn, the scripture was read dramatically by a narrator and other persons who read the parts of Jesus, the woman, and the disciples. Scripture was then interpreted by two dancers using the visual symbols of a water pitcher, the baptismal font, and abundantly rippling water. The baptismal font was the visual center of both the dance and the scripture reading. Following this proclamation through dance, a choir sang an anthem using vivid water images, accompanied by a rain stick, a South American instrument that makes the sound of rushing water. Next, the congregation members renewed their baptisms with water from pitchers filled at the font, while the choir sang "Living Water," a song by Miriam Therese Winter. The last hymn, "Freely, Freely," sent us out with an encouragement to witness to our faith in Christ as the woman at the well had done.

In another service, on Maundy Thursday, the worship environment was beautifully designed for the congregation to sit facing one another around tables set with candles and white tablecloths. In the center was a small table with bread and a cup surrounded by