Can we alter the language of hymns and songs?

The worship staff receives a number of similar inquires on worship-related topics from across the church.

These responses should not be considered the final word on the topic, but useful guides that are to be considered in respect to local context with pastoral sensitivity.

> *The use of language, especially, is always evolving. Language is an expression of culture that is shaped by many factors. Its use requires faithful reflection, humility, and discernment. Additional resources for further study are suggested at the end of this document.*

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Let us first address this question on a very practical level because the issue of copyright is at the heart of it. (See also, "Copyrights and Permissions") If you would like to take a hymn/song that is under copyright, change a word or two and reprint it in a bulletin, doing so without permission breaks copyright law. If however, a hymn/song is not under copyright, the decision to change it is less black and white.

If you spread a collection of hymnals out on a table and take a look at them closely, you will see that language is not static; the hymns and songs we sing reflect the times and places in which we live. Lutheran hymnals are not the same nor are the hymnals of other Christian denominations. Why do the words of hymns and songs change over time?

Inclusivity

One desire for change stems from a growing concern for inclusivity. The ELCA's *Principles for Worship,* a guide for this church on language, music, worship space and preaching states: "The language of worship embodies God's mercy and justice, forming us to live as merciful and just people" (Principle L-4). Because what we speak (and even more so what we sing) shapes us as God's people in the world, the words we use for God and one another matter profoundly. For example, the hymn, "Rise Up, O Saints of God" (ELW 669) has appeared in predecessor hymnals as "Rise Up, O Men of God." The change to "saints" recognizes that both men and women are "heirs of God's baptismal grace," equipped to witness in Christ's name. As *Principles for Worship* continues, a concern for mercy and justice means that "care is taken to use language that expresses mutuality with all people, all nations, and all creation, rather than attitudes of domination, division or triumphalism" (Application L-4E).

Care has been taken that *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* and its family of resources reflects *Principles for Worship*. Some, however, may believe current language still does not go far enough in its inclusivity.[1]

Human language is not perfect; it cannot capture the mystery of God. Yet knowing its power, we (and such decisions are best made in cooperation) continue to seek language for our worship that is "durable, able to bear repetition and the weight of mystery" (Application L-5C).

Worldview

Simply put, the words of our songs change because we change and the world in which we live changes. In his book *Praying Twice: The Music and Words of Congregational Song,* author and hymn writer Brian Wren gives the example of a hymn by Charles Wesley. The original text from 1742 read:

> *To me, to all, they bowels move,*
> *Thy nature, and thy name is love.*
>
> In 1893, the text was altered to read:
> *To me, to all, they mercies move –*
> *Thy nature, and thy name is Love.*[2]

Hymns need to express the congregation's faith. Proclamation— rather than preservation original— is the primary intent of assembly song.[3] As Wren notes further in this chapter, "If your favorite hymns are more than fifty years old, they were almost certainly altered before you first sang them." When we accept that hymns are living expressions and not something to be preserved like a museum piece, it is easier to understand that because we change, the texts of our hymns and songs will change.[4]

Ecumenical Cooperation

Many of the hymns and songs of the church are shared across denominations and cultures. One reason to alter the words of a hymn or song is to express this unity in Christ. A principle that guided the editorial team for *ELW* states succinctly: "Hymnody reflects and serves the unity of the church."[5] Hymnal committees are wise to consult those in other denominations so that, whenever possible, the language of hymnody can be shared. If the author of a hymn is still living, be sure that he/she is also consulted as revisions are considered.

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[1] For an example of a hymnal that makes different decisions regarding inclusivity, see the hymnal of the United Church of Christ, *The New Century Hymnal*.
[2] Printed in Wren, *Praying Twice,* p. 297.
[3] "Two primary tasks of hymnody are to proclaim the word of God—law and gospel, justice and mercy—and to support the celebration of the sacraments" (Foundational Principles of the Hymnody Editorial Team for *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, Hymnal Companion to *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, p. 834).
[4] The entire chapter, "To Me, to All, Thy Bowels Move": Why Do They Keep Changing the Good Old Hymns" is especially helpful for its examination of many familiar hymns and a list of principles for altering assembly song. See, *Praying Twice,* p. 297-348. Another succinct resource can be found in the *Hymnal Companion to Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. See Resources below.
[5] Westermeyer, Hymnal Companion to *ELW,* p. 834.

Collective Memory

> *Hymnody both honors memory and forms memory, both nurtures faith and helps faith grow.*[6]

Sometimes a choice is made to retain archaic language. This choice might be made for the sake of collective memory or ecumenical cooperation. One example of this is the hymn "Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming (ELW 272). In the predecessor hymnal, *Lutheran Book of Worship,* this hymn had been revised to "Lo, How a Rose is Growing."
The choice might also be made for poetic reasons. Wren notes that, "user response to language changes also depends upon how elegantly they are made" (*Praying Twice,* 316*)*. The words to "How Great Thou Art?" are not modern; we seldom use "thou art" in everyday conversation. Yet could we imagine singing, "How great you are" to the same tune instead of "How great thou art"?

Hymns and songs sung in corporate worship are communal in nature; they are the community's songs. When considering alteration, then, these decisions are wisely made in community. Hymnal committees understand the many layers of complexity when it comes to liturgical language; they are not infallible, but their collective work enriches our collective singing.

Some words about metaphor

When we are considering the language of hymns and songs, it is helpful to remember the prominent place of metaphor. As liturgical language scholar Gail Ramshaw describes, "metaphor, far from being merely a decorative figure of speech, is the fundamental unit of creative thought. In metaphor, the mind expands in a fresh way, imagining the new and renovating the old. Metaphor does not label; it connects in a revolutionary way" (*Reviving Sacred Speech*, 8). We know that our language is limited, yet we also know the power of metaphor to shape our understanding.

The hymn "A Mighty Fortress is Our God" is one that has been translated and revised numerous times over the centuries. A loose paraphrase of Psalm 46 by Martin Luther, this hymn has moved beyond Lutheran circles to become a very familiar and beloved Christian hymn. The hymn works on the level of metaphor. We sing that God is a "mighty fortress." Some versions have this fortress as a "bulwark never failing," others "a sword and shield victorious," yet still others, "a trusty shield and weapon." These words are metaphor; they are not literally true, but reimagining how we regard the divine. Certainly battle language abounds in scripture, yet for some, the images in this hymn might be troubling. How can we be truthful about the existence of war without glorifying it? This is an example where frank, open conversation about the power of metaphor in particular and language in general can be tremendously fruitful. When we sing any hymn in worship, its context will shape how it is heard and sung. In some instances, "A Mighty Fortress" may be just the thing to proclaim the steadfastness of God in all times; in other instances, its reputation as the "Lutheran fight song" might make its benefits less clear. *Principles for Worship* affirms: "The language of worship is a language of a transformed people, a foretaste of God's realm. Although all human languages are imperfect, we

[6] Ibid., 834.

continually seek to use words in ways that reveal God's mercy and justice" (Application L-4B). As our words change, we draw comfort in God's promise to abide forever.

RESOURCES

Frequently Asked Questions:

- Copyrights and Permissions
- How are worship resources prepared and approved by the ELCA?
- How is language used in worship?
- What is the role of music in the Lutheran liturgy?

Resources available for download on the ELCA Website:

- *The Use of the Means of Grace: A Statement on the Practice of Word and Sacrament.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997. (Available in English and Spanish)
- *Principles for Worship.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002. (Available in English and Spanish)

Resources Available from Augsburg Fortress:

- Westermeyer, Paul. *Hymnal Companion to Evangelical Lutheran Worship.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2010. See especially "Guiding Principles and Goals of the Hymnody Editorial Team for Evangelical Lutheran Worship," pp. 833-837.

Other Resources

- Ramshaw, Gail. *Reviving Sacred Speech: The Meaning of Liturgical Language.* Akron, OH: OSL Publications, 2000.
- Wren, Brian. *Praying Twice: The Music and Words of Congregational Song.* Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2000.
- "[Re-]Framing Welcome through Song: A Field Report," Martin Tel, *The Hymn,* Volume 72, No. 2, August 2021, pp. 18-26.

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