



## Worship Formation & Liturgical Resources: Frequently Asked Questions

### How do we expand our congregation's hymn repertoire?

*The worship staff receives a number of similar inquiries 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 response herein may be reproduced for congregational use as long as the web address is cited on each copy.*

When Martin Luther discussed the selection of music and readings for his parish in Wittenberg in 1523, at a time of great liturgical upheaval in that community, he pointed to two dangers:

[The Bishop] should choose the best of the responsories and antiphons and appoint them from Sunday to Sunday throughout the week, taking care lest the people should either be bored by too much repetition of the same or confused by too many changes in the chants and lessons. ["An Order of Mass and Communion For the Church at Wittenberg, 1523," *Luther's Works* (53:38)]

These remarks from Luther still speak volumes in our own time. As we consider what to sing in our congregations, we often walk a fine line between being bored by too much sameness and being overwhelmed by too much change. How does a congregation choose new music in a way that balances our desires for both newness and familiarity?

Knowing your assembly is the first step in expanding its body of known hymns. How many hymns do they know well? 100? 300? How open is the assembly to learning new hymns? Like expanding your dinner menu from a few tried-and-true recipes, assembly song always thrives on a balanced diet in terms of newness (as well as other dimensions such as style and era). Such balance needs to be handled carefully, with careful planning when new items are added to the mix. Careful planning and introduction is even more important when the style of a new hymn is quite different than the style of the core well-known hymns.

This entry will help you with three dimensions of expanding your assembly's hymn repertoire: How to evaluate your current hymn repertoire, practical methods for expanding it and where to find new hymnody. (see also, ["How do we introduce new music to our congregation?"](#)) for guidance on the mechanics of teaching new hymns and other service music.

## **Taking Inventory**

Before seeking out new hymns, it is very helpful to take stock of what is already known. Here is an easy method for keeping track of familiar hymns. Keep a hymnal in the church office or in the music area (organ, piano, rehearsal room), perhaps affixing a sticker “record of hymns” on the front or spine. Each time a hymn is sung, write the date in pencil on the appropriate page in the hymnal. After months (and even more after years) you will get a sense for what the assembly knows. If this system is not in place, someone could take old service folders and start the record that way.

Once you have a sense of what hymns are known, it is helpful to take time to see what patterns emerge. How balanced is the menu of hymns? Below are some questions to guide you. Tunes and texts are treated separately for the different questions that emerge, but be aware that an effective pairing of the text with a tune is often what makes a hymn successful.

When assessing the texts:

- Are they mostly inner focused, personal hymns ("Take My Life, That I May Be") or outer focused, communal hymns ("Rise Up, O Saints of God!")
- What are the images used for God? Is God usually spoken of as Father? Rock? Fortress? Friend? Is God transcendent and all powerful in all the hymns, more down-to-earth and personal, or a mix of both?
- When speaking of or to God, to whom do the hymns refer? Does the mix of hymns include all three members of the Trinity, or does one person stand out from the others? That is, are they mostly Father/Creator hymns, Jesus/Savior hymns, Holy Spirit hymns, or a mix of all three?
- How is the church viewed: a collection of holy people (in contrast to the evil found outside the church), or a community of sinners?
- Is the world seen as a dangerous, broken, sin-filled place, or a place of grace, bounty, and beauty?
- What kind of vocabulary do the hymns use? Do they all use "thee" and "thy"? Is there a preponderance of one kind of image – flock after flock of sheep, or battalion after battalion of soldiers, for example?

When assessing the tunes:

- Does one ethnic origin (German, Swedish, Norwegian, Danish, etc.) predominate among the well-known hymns, or is there a mix? Are they all European in origin, or does the mix include African, Latin American, and Asian tunes?
- Do the hymns come from different historical eras: the 20<sup>th</sup> century, 18<sup>th</sup> century, 16<sup>th</sup> century, etc.
- Are most of the well-known hymns introspective, lyrical tunes? Military Marches? Bouncy folk tunes?
- Are there many in a refrain/verse style?
- Do they know hymns that can be sing well unaccompanied (chant, spirituals, Taizé)?

This is not an exhaustive list, but something to get the conversation started. Questions such as these will point out what might be missing and point to what hymns to introduce first. This kind of conversation could take place between pastors and musicians, in a worship and music committee meeting or in an educational forum.

Of course, an underlying question for some might be, “why do we sing new hymns at all?” What are benefits of learning new music? For more on this, see also, [“How do we introduce new music to our congregation?”](#)

### **Methods for Expanding Hymn Repertoire**

Below are some tried and true ways to introduce a new hymn.

#### *New tunes set to familiar texts*

If a congregation is unsure of its ability to handle new music, a good place to begin might be with new texts set to familiar melodies. This enhances the congregation’s confidence while exposing them to new texts, with their new images, metaphors, and phrases. For example, Ruth Duck’s Epiphany hymn "Arise, Your Light Has Come" (ELW 314) is set to the same tune (Festal Song) as "Rise Up, O Saints of God!" (ELW 669).

#### *Choose hymns with easily learned refrains*

Introducing hymns with easily memorized refrains can add newness without too much challenge, especially if a choir or cantor sings the verses of the hymn. This works especially well at communion. Examples include “I Received the Living God” (ELW 477) or “Taste and See” (ELW 493).

#### *Employ Choirs/Vocal Ensembles*

A children’s or adult ensemble can be very helpful in learning a new hymn. They can sing the hymn as an anthem in the weeks previous. They can sing a stanza or more of the hymn alone before the assembly joins. For a verse/refrain style song, a small ensemble or cantor can sing the verses while the assembly sings the refrains.

#### *Balance the New with Familiar Hymns, paying attention to how the hymn functions in worship.*

It matters when in the liturgy a new hymn is sung. Unless it’s been taught immediately before it is sung or a choir has a strong leadership role, the gathering or sending is not often the best place for a new hymn. The Hymn of the Day or a hymn at the offering/ table setting may be more successful. New refrain/verse hymns could work well during communion if a cantor/choir leads them. However, if a new hymn will be sung for many weeks, during the season of Advent for example, the gathering or sending may actually be best for a new hymn. Since the Hymn of the Day is more closely linked with the lectionary texts, it makes less sense to repeat a hymn in this place each week.

#### *Keep the hymn going*

Once a congregation learns a new hymn, it’s best not to wait too long before singing it again. Consider using the hymn frequently during a liturgical season or at other events in the life of the congregation such as meetings, retreats, or fellowship events.

## Where to Find New Music

There are all kinds of places to look for new hymns, and the place for most people to start is right in front of you. Start with the hymns you don't sing already in the resources you already own.

In addition to exploring your hymnal(s), consider other hymnals or hymnal supplements. Some of these resources, published by Augsburg Fortress and used throughout the ELCA include: *Worship and Praise*, *This Far by Faith* and *Libro de Liturgica y Cantico*. You may also want to explore the hymnals of other denominations, particularly the [ELCA's full communion partners](#). If your congregation wants to explore many hymns by a certain hymn writer, you can purchase collections of their work. *Sundays and Seasons* provides helpful information and suggestions for additional hymns/songs.

### *Using the Web*

The internet can be a useful resource for hymnody. [www.hymnary.org](http://www.hymnary.org) allows one to search for hymns by tune, text, hymnal and more. See also [sundaysandseasons.com](http://sundaysandseasons.com)

### *Who you know*

Another obvious approach is to ask around, being as specific as possible about what you are looking for. Your worship committee could ask members for suggestions of hymns they have sung elsewhere. The pastor could ask her colleagues at the weekly Bible study, the organist could talk to his or her counterparts at nearby churches, etc.

### *Pay attention to copyrights/permission*

In this search for new music, do pay attention to copyrights and permissions. Authors of hymn texts, composers of tunes, and arrangers of hymns work hard to create the music we sing, and deserve the credit and compensation for their work. If you aren't familiar with copyright issues, see also, [Copyrights and Permissions resource](#).

### *Professional organizations*




Consider having your church musicians and pastors join the [Association of Lutheran Church Musicians \(ALCM\)](#) and/or [The Hymn Society in the United States and Canada](#). ALCM is a pan-Lutheran organization, while the Hymn Society is a larger ecumenical association. Both are dedicated to the music ministry of the Church, and exist to support those who lead such ministries. Both hold regular conferences and workshops, and both publish fine journals and newsletters. Members of these groups are regularly exposed to new and "new-to-you" hymns, which keeps their congregations' music ministries fresh.

## RESOURCES







### Frequently Asked Questions:

- ☺ How do we introduce new music to our congregation?
- ☺ How do we select hymns and songs for all seasons?






### Resources Available for Download on the ELCA Website:

-  Worship Formation Resources: produced by the ELCA Worship Staff may help a congregation dig deeper into many aspects of worship including assembly song.
-  Copyrights and Permissions
-  ELCA Full Communion Partners

### Resources Available from Augsburg Fortress:

-  *Sundays and Seasons*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress. Print version published annually by church year.
  -  Also available as an online subscription at [www.sundaysandseasons.com](http://www.sundaysandseasons.com).
-  *Musician's Guide to Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2007. This resource offers guides on leading assembly song and assistance in leading each hymn, song and piece of liturgical and service music in Evangelical Lutheran Worship.
-  Buckley Farlee, Robert. *Musicians in the Assembly*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001.
-  Brugh, Lorraine S. and Gordon W. Lathrop. *Using Evangelical Lutheran Worship: The Sunday Assembly*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008. See especially Chapter 4: Music and the Arts in the Assembly.
-  Westermeyer, Paul. *Hymnal Companion to Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2010.

### Other Resources

-  Eskew, Harry and Hugh T. McElrath. [\*Sing with Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Hymnology\*](#). Second Edition. Nashville, Tennessee: Church Street Press, 1995.
-  Sydnor, James R. [\*Introducing a New Hymnal: How to improve congregational singing\*](#). Chicago: GIA, 1989.
-  Wren, Brian. [\*Praying Twice: The Music and Words of Congregational Song\*](#). Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000.
-  Association of Lutheran Church Musician (ALCM): <http://www.alcm.org/>
-  The Hymn Society in the United States and Canada: <http://www.thehymnsociety.org/>

*Revised January 2013*

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