



The Methodist Church
Leeds (North East) Circuit 16/2



*Convenor of Local Preachers'
Group on Hymns and Songs*
John S. Summerwill
263 Lidgett Lane
Moortown
LEEDS LS17 6PP
☎ 0113 269 7895
✉ john@summerwill.co.uk

2nd February 2009

Liz Millard,
'Sing a New Song',
Methodist Church House,
25, Marylebone Road,
London,
NW1 5JR

RESPONSES TO THE CONSULTATION ON 'SING A NEW SONG'

We are a group of local preachers in the Leeds (North East) Circuit who have been meeting since October 2008 to discuss the use of hymns and modern worship songs in worship. In our first meetings we discussed criteria for evaluating hymns (see notes at <http://www.preacherdevelopment.uk7.net/current.htm>).

In two meetings we have reviewed the proposed contents of the new hymnbook and I report the following observations made by members of the group.

A. On the questions you ask:

Balance: Is there a good mix of traditional hymns, worship songs, world church songs, etc.?

- We are not sure that this is the right question to ask. Our focus as preachers is more on whether it contains the resources we need to conduct services, and whether all it contains is usable. It certainly does have a mixture, but not enough of the traditional, and much will not be useful (see below).
- The Christmas section is thin, and we regret the omission of many loved traditional hymns.
- The sections on Jesus' teaching and ministry, our staples from Epiphany to Passiontide, are weak.
- There's not nearly enough material for the seven Sundays of Easter.
- Other thin sections are Human Creativity, Temptation and Conflict, Growth in Grace and Holiness, Death and Eternal Life, Communion of Saints, Sunday, A World of Faiths.
- There are 28 items by Andrew Pratt against 11 by Isaac Watts (who vies with CW for the title of greatest hymn writer). Are all 28 better than anything we are losing?

Are there authors/songwriters who do not appear on the list who should be included?

- Milton (England's second greatest poet?)
- Rutter (some of whose Christmas material is manageable by congregations)

B. Our concerns

1. Title

'Sing a New Song' is an inappropriate title because:

- it suggests that all the contents are new, which they clearly are not
- it apparently excludes hymns and psalms.

2. Continuity

- We welcome the fact that that the most well-known and popular hymns have been retained, including a number of very ancient hymns, and that a sizeable proportion of the important Wesley heritage survives.
- A hymn book for Methodists is a book for private devotion, not just for congregational singing. We welcome the retention of valuable hymns that may rarely be sung, and wish there were more.
- We regret that too much has been excised. On our estimate, 532 of the hymns in HP (nearly 65%) are to be lost: only a minority will remain. We accept that a new book must have sufficient new content to make it marketable, but it must also have sufficient of what congregations and preachers know and love. We could easily identify between 100 and 200 fine, serviceable hymns whose omission we would regret. Specific examples would be:
 - Come, let us sing of a wonderful love
 - Cradled in a manger, meanly (—quite topical, with its mention of Narnia!)
 - In the bleak mid winter
 - Lord God, by whom all change is wrought
 - My God, I know, I feel thee mine
 - With gladness we worship
- These, and many more, are better by far in poetic quality and theological substance than some of the vacuous new material to be included. The indifferent should not be allowed to oust the good.

3. Novelty

It is good to have new material to use. We cannot check all of the 'new' material proposed because we do not have copies of all of it. We welcome hymns that have something substantial and original to say, such as those of Stuart Bell or Timothy Dudley Smith. We do not see point in including so much relatively old material that our churches already have in *Mission Praise* and *Songs of Fellowship*.

4. Quality

Whatever is used in worship should be the best of its kind. Some of the new hymns proposed for inclusion are very good: others are defective in scansion or rhyme scheme, poetic in form but prosaic in language, tediously repetitive of a single idea. We do not need such material.

5. Depth

A hymn or song so thin in substance that its meaning is laid bare on the first reading will quickly wear out. Too many of the new items proposed are short, transparent and insubstantial.

6. Theological acceptability

We appreciate that a hymnbook for Methodism needs to embrace the theological diversity of Methodism, including both its liberal and conservative evangelical wings. We also see a great danger that preachers and congregations are carried away by a jaunty tune into singing words that are not true, or that are inconsistent with our doctrinal standards. We should not include words that many of our people find objectionable. We think that a more rigorous theological vetting is needed. (For example, the words 'The wrath of God was satisfied' (in 'In Christ alone') are hugely problematical. We do not want such hymns.

7. Editing

The draft list does not tell us what policy will be adopted in regard to editing of hymns. We approve the policy used in *Hymns and Psalms* of using modern, gender-neutral language in modern hymns but leaving classic hymns as their authors wrote them (except for very discreet, unnoticeable editing). We hope that this policy will continue and that the editors will resist the temptation to try to 'improve' or modernise—thereby vandalising and ruining—valuable antiques.

8. Tunes

- It would have been helpful if the list of contents had included tunes.
- Many of the 'new' hymns in *Hymns and Psalms* that are now to be deleted have failed only because they were set to new tunes. A particularly unwise decision in HP was to use unfamiliar tunes for hymns that would only ever be used occasionally, e.g. at Pentecost. We hope that this mistake will be avoided, and that, where a new hymn is of a standard metre, it will be given a familiar tune as well as an original one where necessary, or cross-referenced to a suitable well-known tune.
- We hope that a new book will still have plenty of four-part harmony settings for choirs and for those of us who like to sing in harmony. Many worship songs have melodies pitched too high for deeper and older voices. Wherever a tune has been composed simply as melody and accompaniment, we hope that consideration will be given to including at least one lower line of harmony. It is also welcome to have descant lines for choirs in some of the great classic hymns.
- Consideration should be given to printing a melody edition, not just harmony or words-only.

9. Arrangement

On the whole, the section headings seem helpful, except for the misguided attempt to use the Grace as a basis for heading the sections on God, Christ and the Holy Spirit, which is completely misleading as to the real and varied themes of the hymns listed. There are also some most peculiar judgements about placings: e.g. harvest hymns in two different sections; the three hymns from HP in the 'Death and Eternal Life' section are no more appropriate here than would be 'Love Divine', 'O thou who camest', or any other of the hundreds of hymns that have a future reference. 'In heavenly love abiding' is mainly about this life, and loosely based on Psalm 23. Recognizing the difficulty of categorising absolutely, it highlights for us the need for cross-referencing. Every section needs to have an appended list of 'See also...s', and/or the book needs a subject index in which hymns may be listed in more than one section.

10. Psalms

We welcome the inclusion of some psalm settings but hope this will not be all. There is need for all of the psalms listed in the lectionary to be included, either in metrical or in prose form. We still need canticles and psalms such as we have in HP for congregational antiphonal reading. One church with West Indian roots in our circuit still sings the Te Deum and Venite regularly—though in the MHB settings. Clearly some thought has been given to including more material reflecting ethnic and cultural diversity in today's church. Has enough thought been given to the retention/recovery of Methodist traditions that white British Methodism has lost?

11. Indexes

As preachers, we need guides to help us find suitable material for services. We trust that there will be thorough indexing, including indexes of scripture references, lectionary links, themes, authors, tunes, composers, metres, and that pages will have running section and sub-section headings.

12. Short Songs

Most of us question the value of this section and of the inclusion of many other short items elsewhere in the book (e.g. the opening section). Much of this material is ephemeral. The churches most likely to want to use it are also the ones best equipped to project it onto a screen; it lends itself better to that than do the lengthier traditional hymns. It might be included in a CD supplement. We think the limited space available in the printed book should be used for the more substantial, enduring hymns. Some members of the group, however, welcome such songs as these.

Yours sincerely,

John S. Summerwill (on behalf of seven local preachers who have consented to this response)