

## Hymn Trends – A Heavy Cross to Bear

To the dwindling minority of Canadians who still attend church, no words are more menacing than the minister's hale announcement: "Next week, we get our new hymn books." The hearts of all but the tone-deaf plummet, a grim foreboding settles in the breast, and, as they make their way home, the congregants ask themselves, for the thousandth time, how much longer can we stand it? Will the hymns about to be foisted on us by an inclusive, sensitive and ecumenical committee from Church headquarters prove to be the last straw?

Not long ago, my church replaced its still serviceable red hymn books (a joint Anglican-United Church effort imaginatively titled *The Hymn Book*) with the unwieldy new Anglican-only blue hymn book called *Common Praise*.

The provenance of *Common Praise* does not inspire confidence. It was the product of what was called a "Hymn Book Task Force," once a military term, today co-opted for any occasion when two or three busybodies are gathered together to decide anything for everyone else.

Given that this particular "task force" had bridled at the inclusion of the hymn ***Onward Christian Soldiers***, acceding to its inclusion only after a full-scale denominational revolt, one wonders how easily the description "task force" sat upon such pacific shoulders? ***Onward Sensitive Concerned People of Indeterminate Gender would have been more to their liking.***

The preface to *Common Praise* sets out the agenda: "The present book appears following a period of intense change; new translations of the Bible; new forms of worship; new lectionaries; new styles of language and music in worship; shifts in sensitivity to the ways in which language can exclude or include; increased awareness of and contact with other cultures, races, languages, and religious denominations ... some older texts have been altered so that they may continue to be sung in the present and in years to come."

Indeed, they have. Even Martin Luther's great Reformation hymn, ***Ein Feste Burg – A Mighty Fortress is Our God*** – has been monkeyed with. God is no longer a "mighty" fortress but just a "fortress"; He's not a "bulwark never failing," but rather "our help in trouble." The devil is no longer "armed with cruel hate" but rather – like a mischievous uncle – "Our old malicious foe ... set to do us woe."

Luther's hymn concluded with the defiant words: "The body they may kill; God's truth abideth still, His Kingdom is forever." Our Anglican committee renders this: "By faith we let them go; they gain no victory so: all's ours with Jesus' kingdom." Luther's point I understand, but could someone please explain what the committee was trying to say here?

We now have hymns printed in French, Cree, Mohawk, Nisga'a, Ojibway, Inuktituk and Swahili, plus plenty of "... new musical styles in a variety of popular idioms." But gone are two of my favourite hymns: ***Come Let Us Sing of a Wonderful Love, and Dear Lord and Father of Mankind.*** No prize is awarded for guessing why the latter is omitted, nor why the sun that bids us

rest (in Ellerton's *The Day Thou Gavest*) no longer wakes "our brethren 'neath the western sky." In fact, the whole effort might pretty much be summed up as begotten by Mary Poppins out of the Feminist Collective.

Worst – because ubiquitous – is tinkering, constant tinkering with the language of venerable hymns, replacing "thou" by "you" (a smarmy chumminess with the Almighty is now *de rigeur*); a dumbing-down of language based on the assumption that we alone among Christendom's previous 20 centuries cannot comprehend anything more complex than a Jean Chrétien speech. And, first, last and foremost, stamping out the male pronoun wherever it may rear its ugly head.

Having virtually rewritten many hymns, the editors nevertheless have the cheek to ascribe the result to their original authors. Most have by now been laid to rest, but it is unclear to me why their peaceful repose should be mocked by such Philistines.

In everything, there are small blessings to be found, and I confess that I was pleased to see that *God of Concrete, God of Steel* had not made the transition from the red to the blue hymn book. And, if it's any comfort, *Common Praise* is preferable to the Church of England's latest effort, *Hymns for Today's Church*, which Rev. Peter Mullen, writing in *The Oldie*, called "... a catalogue of infelicities and desecrations." One of the new English hymns asks Jesus to be with me "in my depression"; if hymnal revision does not cease, this particular ditty may soon top the Sunday charts.

I second Rev. Mullen's motion for the title of the next Anglican hymnbook: *Who Would True Valium See.*

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