

Why a New Songbook for the URC?

As I type these words, my eyes and my mind are tired. I've spent most of my day poring over the words of hymns – sifting wheat from chaff, considering the implications of phrases, and evaluating editorial changes.

I've spent several hours reviewing hymns proposed for use in a new URC Psalter Hymnal.

Last year our Consistory exposed the congregation to a number of hymns proposed for this new songbook, and we've used several of the newly revised liturgical forms. In response, we've gotten three general kinds of responses.

Response 1: No Change, Thanks. Some members have expressed the sentiment that the songs and forms in our current Psalter Hymnal are fine, and no change is needed. *"Please don't ask us to change songbooks."*

Response 2: Wow – That Was ... Not Great. Others have responded to a song or a form by noting that the old was better than the new. Without rejecting the whole project, they have noted a lack in a particular area.

Response 3: This Is Change I Might Be Able to Believe In. A third response has been cautious optimism. As a congregation, we generally don't embrace change rashly (which is a good thing). Yet some folks have expressed appreciation in the effort to improve, noting their pleasure with particular songs.

Hearing those responses has helped the Consistory. We've especially benefitted from comments aimed at a particular song or form that helps us to see why the change is appreciated ... or how further changes are needed.

Recognizing the value of such feedback, it seemed wise to address the concept of a new songbook in general. More than a few people have asked why the URC even needs a new songbook – or why our congregation should involve itself in the process – when the 1976 Psalter Hymnal serves us so well.

I've given those questions plenty of thought. I'm no fan of changing what works well. And I certainly sympathize with the desire to ignore the whole thing. (Believe it or not, there are plenty of other ways I could have spent my day!)

However, I believe that it's important for us to take part in this process. Let me explain why.

First, however, we need some historical context.

The URC Psalter Hymnal Committee was created by Synod St. Catharines in 1997. The committee was asked to investigate what would be required to produce, reproduce, or obtain a Psalter Hymnal. At the time, the 1976 Psalter Hymnal was out of print, and the CRC Board of Publications – which held the copyright – did not seem inclined to order a new print run at the request of a group of churches that had just left the CRC.

In 1999, the CRC Board of Publications agreed to print more copies of the 1976 Psalter Hymnal – an offer that Synod Hudsonville 1999 readily accepted. Another printing happened in 2004. Our need for songbooks has been met.

However, every synod has ordered the Psalter Hymnal Committee to continue its work to create a new songbook for the URC, with Synod Calgary 2004 creating a second committee to focus on liturgical forms and confessions.

Why bother? There are a few reasons – the greatest involving future need. We can't guarantee that CRC Publications will continue making limited print runs for a book published in 1976. Even if they remain willing, the price is now up to \$18 per book. Eventually, we're going to need a new option.

A second consideration is our younger generation. Like it or not, some of the songs and forms in our beloved Psalter Hymnal are difficult for young folks and for those new to the faith to understand. Consider the first stanza of #423:

*Deck thyself, my soul, with gladness, Leave the gloomy haunts of sadness,
Come into the daylight's splendor, There with joy thy praises render
Unto Him whose grace unbounded Has this wondrous banquet founded.
High o'er all the earth He reigneth, Yet to dwell with thee He deigneth.*

Ask any teenager what that stanza means. "Deck thyself" – does that mean I'm supposed to hit myself? "Gloomy haunts of sadness" – is that referring to ghosts? "Deigneth" ... "Deigneth"???

Then turn to #458 and ask them to explain: *Come, ye disconsolate, where'er ye languish, come to the mercy seat, fervently kneel.* Finally, turn to #449 and ask what "intercourse at hearth or board" refers to.

Over time, words change meaning or fall out of use. And since the songs we sing are intended to be the congregation's united expression of prayer and praise to God, the whole congregation needs to understand what we sing. That means we occasionally need to revise the words we sing to ensure that young and old alike can sing with understanding.

Finally, our synods have recognized that the 1976 Psalter Hymnal is not perfect. It's one of the best songbooks available – but even it could be improved. For instance, some of the Psalms are not included in their entirety. Other songs use tunes that are quite difficult (as shown by our mumbling through a few that I've inadvertently selected). And, to be honest, a few of our songs are theologically weak. Not many – but a few.

Considering all of these things together, the churches have agreed that we should be working on a replacement. That's what our Psalter Hymnal and Liturgical Forms committees are doing.

(I should note, for the record, that for a few years the committees worked on producing a *joint* songbook for the URC and CanRC (Canadian Reformed). That project has been discontinued. Their goal is a URC songbook – period.)

I have no desire to sit on either of these committees. Theirs is a never-ending job that is guaranteed to annoy people. The songbook that will please everyone, even in a relatively small federation, is impossible to produce.

Even the 1959/1976 Psalter Hymnal failed in that respect – as shown by our little *Songs We Like* booklet. That title is more than a bit sarcastic. With only two exceptions, the songs it contains were in the 1934 Psalter Hymnal but were not included in the “new” Psalter Hymnal of 1959. People were not happy about the omissions. “Hey – those were songs we like!”

However, while I have no desire to serve on the songbook committees, I *do* believe that our Consistory is wise to work through the proposed hymns and liturgical forms, submitting overtures and offering feedback in response. That means more work for us. But I think it's the wise course of action.

You see, three events are likely within a decade or so:

First, the URC will publish a songbook. For better or for worse, it's probably going to happen. I, for one, would like it to be “for better,” not “for worse.”

Second, our Psalter Hymnals will need to be replaced. We can tape and glue for quite a few years before that happens. But eventually, we'll need to replace them, either with new books or ... with a screen and a projector.

And third, CRC Publications will stop reprinting the 1976 Psalter Hymnal.

Put those three factors together, and you can see the wisdom in taking the time to make the URC's eventual songbook the best it can be.

That's where you come in.

The Consistory has already spent plenty of time reviewing and offering suggested changes for the liturgical forms that have been proposed. We've spent evenings singing together to see which tunes are too challenging. And we are continuing to slog through the lyrics of the latest proposed hymns.

In the future, we'll repeat that work with the proposed Psalm selections.

On occasion, we will ask you to sing some of the song selections and to use some of the liturgical forms. *Your constructive feedback is appreciated!* If you see phrases that could be improved; if you have trouble with a particular tune; or if you question the theological slant of a form – please let us know. We *will* consider each comment. And we will thank you for your insights.

Above all else, please pray – both for your office-bearers, and for all of those who are working on the proposed songbook. Our prayer is that this work will glorify God by helping His churches to worship Him well. It would be wonderful if that would be your prayer, too.