

What Is a Hymn Festival? How Is One Planned?

BY ERIC WALL

Hymn festivals are offshoots of worship: occasions of prayer and community where the central activity is singing. We know music-centered worship offshoots by different names and models. An old-fashioned hymn sing may consist of a pianist and a leader who says, “Call out your favorites!” At this event speech may be mostly titles and page numbers and the musical activity is almost entirely congregational. In December, by contrast, many communities offer another kind of hymn event, known as Lessons and Carols. This service centers on storytelling and leans more towards listening. Readings are central to its structure and while congregational singing occurs, musical responses may favor choral offerings. A hymn festival generally falls somewhere between these two types.

A hymn festival is a special event focused on congregational song, with intentional creativity and variety. It is usually sixty to seventy-five minutes of congregational songs, most often linked by readings, narrations, or prayers, typically organized around a central theme, idea, or occasion. Strong musical or scholarly leadership is often a featured element. Festivals often involve choirs or other musical ensembles of a church or churches. The amount of singing at a hymn festival is usually greater than at worship and spoken elements may be different in character or broader in range. As at worship, though, these elements work together. At best, these different elements are chosen, created, and arranged so that they complement each other, sharing common themes less by simple re-statement and more through their unique qualities.

A hymn festival’s particular purpose usually summons a particularly eager congregation: they show up to sing. Their enthusiasm and curiosity mean that the musical net can be cast wide. New songs find a welcome; ways of singing and accompanying can be creative, experimental, inventive—even a little wacky at times. For lovers of singing, a hymn festival can be not only deeply moving but also great fun. Whatever the theme, a huge part of a festival’s appeal is sheer delight in singing.

That delight, of course, comes not only from the deep love of singing but from the deep need for it as well. That need may be particularly acute in certain seasons of the year or in a community’s hard passages; in these times, a hymn festival might fulfill pastoral needs, allowing the community to “pour out its soul” in lament, grief, confession, or repentance.

Because a hymn festival so strongly affirms singing as a congregational practice, it may have far-reaching implications for the festival congregation and for others. Those who participate may be energized to be strong and creative advocates for singing in their own communities. Learning new songs, people may come away with enthusiasm for weaving new songs into worship back home. Song-leaders of all kinds find new ideas for their home singing practices. Festival choirs, bands, or other ensembles may be able to involve children and youth as well as adults, offering multiple generations new windows into vibrant congregational singing. These ripple effects of a hymn festival may have benefits long after the festival itself has ended.

A hymn festival can raise our spirits; it can also raise eyebrows or questions. Both worship and a hymn festival can be hallowed ground, but a festival sometimes has the advantage of being more neutral territory and less sacrosanct turf. It might shake those of us who are song-leaders out of comfortable repertoires. It can make room for bold theology and hard-hitting texts. It may welcome musicians and sounds that are not always included. Part of a hymn festival’s ethos is to allow space for experimentation, so a festival may be a safe place to try various ways of singing. If singing from a screen or singing from a book is a new experience for some, a festival may be a way to sample a new format. These are also gifts of a hymn festival.

Where and When?

A festival might be the expected highlight of a professional gathering, where location, leadership, and theme all contribute to its character. On a more local level, it may arise within a single church, as a collaboration of churches and music programs, or as an intentional partnership between a church and a community. Leadership, choirs, and other festive features will help draw people, but it is also wise to think in terms of other scheduling advantages. Any special event such as a hymn festival will almost certainly compete with other things on people’s calendars. Attendance is not a statistical goal, but congregational singing gains power and possibility when the community is abundant.

Festival Themes

What guides the creation of a hymn festival? Some underlying theme or idea usually prompts its conception and planning. Here are some common ones:

- Scripture: A festival might be shaped by particular texts: narratives, parables, characters, or books.
- Season: A festival may be rooted in a single liturgical season or weave through several seasons.
- Repertory: A festival may highlight certain kinds of songs or kinds of singing. It might focus on psalm settings, the hymnody of a particular denomination or tradition, certain genres of song, or certain compositional styles of music.
- History: A festival may explore aspects of church history, a period of music history, or theological ideas as expressed in singing.
- Theology: A festival occurring at a conference or as a collaboration between churches could explore a theological theme related to current events, an educational focus, or a community's sense of direction and calling. It might relate to some other aspect of a tradition's theology or identity.
- Leadership: A festival may be shaped around the particular gifts and work of a song-leader or hymn scholar, with the excitement of hosting a special guest. These festivals can give eye- and ear-opening experiences of what singing means and what kinds of singing are possible.
- Authors/Composers: A festival may celebrate the work of particular authors, composers, or both. These might be historic or established creators, but it can be particularly worthwhile to sing the work of very recent or local creators.
- Song Collections: A festival might celebrate a newly published collection of song, such as a denominational hymnal. It might also anticipate one, helping to try out ideas for a new collection or spark interest in a forthcoming publication.
- Instruments and Spaces: A new organ or other instrument(s) can be well celebrated at a festival, allowing an instrument to be put through its paces as a leader of song. For an organ in particular, which is a large and costly project, a hymn festival is a firm statement of the instrument's servant role as a leader of song, a different statement than a recital. A new or renovated worship space can also be celebrated with a hymn festival, lifting up the sound of a space and its ability to enable a congregation's singing.
- Communities: A hymn festival might celebrate milestones in a church's life, such as a founding or an anniversary. It might help several churches strengthen connections by hosting a festival as a joint event.

Ideas like these can shape a festival and its primary content of songs. Ten to fifteen songs will have specific and cumulative effects—an arc with rise and fall. It is important to be attentive to balance, variety, and texture so that wholeness is somehow evident. If a festival focuses on a particular genre or historical period, for example, its song choices may fall within a particular range, with variety and balance in that framework. A festival rooted in a season or in a selection of scriptures may allow a wider range of song styles, but it will still call for attention to how those songs work together.

Song Choices and Treatments

How do we bring songs to life at a festival? Here are some issues involved:

- Balance and texture: What are the balances of short and long songs? Of strophic hymns and choruses? Of our own tradition and others? Of familiar and unfamiliar? Variety and character help songs to have relief and profile. In the space of sixty to seventy-five minutes, every song counts expressively.
- Texts: Are the texts of songs covering a wide enough theological range? What are the varieties in language and vocabulary? Is there an emphasis on intellectual density or theological argument at the expense of occasional lightness or playfulness? Is there both comfort and challenge? Are texts only from an earlier era, or do they give us words for the demands on the church today?
- Singing textures: Is everyone singing everything, or are there more creative ways to deploy the congregation and supporting musicians? Songs that allow for call-and-response help make singing an engaging conversation. Dividing stanzas between groups or voices helps make the festival texture colorful, allowing different textual encounters (sometimes singing, sometimes reading) and particular accompaniments. Placing directions in a bulletin or festival booklet can reinforce any verbal directions. A common practice has been to assign stanzas to men and to women, but our language continues to need careful thought. *Men/women* and *high voices/low voices* do not always mean the same thing, and expanding understandings of gender-identity make those questions more nuanced. Musical terms like *treble/bass* can also be problematic. There are no easy answers nor, necessarily, completely satisfactory solutions, but love and justice demand our efforts here.
- Choirs, bands, small groups: Nothing lends color and detail to a festival like an assortment of sounds and a variety of voices. The wider the range of songs, the more possibilities there are for instrumental and choral roles. Instrument-only stanzas give special possibilities. If resources

and skill levels allow, published arrangements and concertato versions of hymns may be appropriate, but simple and low-tech can work just as well. High school instrumentalists playing the four parts out of the hymnal may be truer to a community than a more elaborate arrangement needing hired players. The gifts within a community may help shape the selection of songs, in fact. Likewise, the presence of a choir can lend nuance to how hymns are sung; choirs can take certain stanzas, can participate in introductions, or can be deployed in different parts of the space to strengthen singing (their primary role anyway). Perhaps choirs and praise bands have not yet found a way or invitation into each other's services; a hymn festival can offer a meeting ground, where differing song styles and sounds are welcomed.

- More than hymns: A hymn festival's texture is often richer when some of the singing is not congregational. This is not contradictory; it is part of the total fabric that a festival can be. Some prayers in worship are offered on the people's behalf by presiders; in a similar way, singing done by specific people or groups edifies the whole congregation. We encounter the interplay of text and music in one way through singing hymns; the encounter is true when we listen to others as well. An ensemble's preparation for a festival can stir up community excitement, often bolstering attendance and contributing to the sense of occasion.
- Leadership: A leader's gift may be scholarship, composition, writing, planning, teaching, or accompanying (usually a combination of those), and leadership moves to a prominent position in a hymn festival. We may think of certain gifted song-leaders who seem to have a particular ability to bring congregational singing to life at the organ, at the piano, with an ensemble, or with their voices. Ineffective song-leading can hinder singing; successful song-leading will point beyond the leader, showing us ways of singing that are trustworthy, energizing, and natural. Strong leadership is a gift to a hymn festival; it also comes with a caution: making sure that leadership results in singing without training an inordinate or unintentional spotlight on itself. Leadership we have witnessed elsewhere can shape our own festival planning. Instead of only remembering how great a leader was, we can ask what that leader did. Dividing stanzas, vocal modeling, imaginative pairings of narration and song, unusual tempos or instruments—these may flourish with particular leaders, but their essence is likely doable by us and by others. Leadership that doesn't offer some take-away risks being too leader-focused.

Singing the Theme

The sung parts of a hymn festival help articulate its theme and ideas. Hymns work in partnership with each other as well as narrations, choral elements, or drama. These form a total festival arc and that arc is really a conversation of elements. Two hymns may sound and sing a certain way if they are back to back; change one of them and the conversation changes; add a narration and it changes again. This is part of a hymn festival's kinship to worship—order and flow, which keep important questions before us. What are hymns doing theologically and contextually? What are they “about”? What is their framework? Texts and tunes arise and come together in different ways, but their nature is to be responsive—to a sense of God, to scripture, or to being alive in the world. Every singing occurs in time and space, specific to an occasion, a theme, a prayer. Our choices of hymns cannot be neutral because hymns themselves are not neutral.

Songs that may seem impossibly diverse musically may be kindred in prayer. Hymn texts may be the unifying bridges for music that ranges far and wide. Theology may show us that the organ and the guitar are not so far removed from each other as we thought. These are the theological dimensions of any gathering where the church sings. A festival may be a good barometer of the current diversity of the church's song and the rightness of opening ourselves to the growing edges of that song.

Beyond Songs

While a festival's theme or ideas emerge most clearly and powerfully in the songs themselves, non-singing components can do some of that work as well. Prayer may be made in speech as in song. There may also be readings, explanations, anecdotes, or other kinds of narrations. There are decisions here of length and content, and those decisions are organic to the particular festival. Narrations might be historical or anecdotal: background on a hymn's creation, stories about composers or writers, or discussing singing practices in historical or current contexts. For other festivals, narrations may come primarily from scripture. They may also be theological reflections written for the occasion, or drawn from other kinds of literature or poetry.

Whatever the content, an underlying question might be this: does a narration only explain or echo a song's content, or does it also lead us into actual singing? Songs, however familiar or new, have their own work to do, offering some kind of surprise, revelation, beauty, or empowerment. Narrations are best if they don't preempt, delay, or obscure the work of songs. Can a narration help release a song's essence? Poetry and music are created for expression more than for analysis. A songwriter writes songs, not examples. A song may well represent a genre, but the writer probably intended to craft a prayer, to help illuminate scripture, or to exhort service to the world. Does a narration take us to the song itself? When a song is over, does the next narration flow out of it naturally? “As

I was saying before that last hymn” is not the impression a narration should give, even accidentally. A song needs to emerge as though it heard the preceding narration; a narration should seem like it heard the preceding song.

Length also matters. Words can sink a hymn, even unintentionally. Does it take longer to read a narration that it takes to sing the hymn it precedes? If a narration is four minutes and the hymn is only two, the effect can be top-heavy. A hymn festival is primarily a singing event; too much speech may have the cumulative effect of down-playing singing.

A Test Case

Let’s imagine a hymn festival with a theme of “The Gifts of Life.” A goal of the opening sequence is a kind of prologue quality. The hymns (chosen first) are “Many and great” (a Dakota hymn), “I sing the mighty power of God” (text by Isaac Watts and tune ELLACOMBE), and “Each breath is borrowed air” (text by Thomas Troeger and tune LORETTA by Sally Ann Morris). They have three distinct text- and sound-worlds, including unaccompanied singing as well as organ and piano. What are some options for how they work together with narrations?

Option 1:

reading: a description of the history of “Many and great”

hymn: “Many and great”

hymn: “I sing the mighty power of God”

reading: Genesis 1

hymn: “Each breath is borrowed air”

The festival here would begin with a teaching narrative—either a history of text or tune or perhaps a description of what the hymn is trying to do. It may be interesting, but is it adequate for the hymn itself, which is remarkably haunting and evocative? Perhaps, but there might be a better way.

Option 2:

reading: Psalm 90: 1-2

hymn: “Many and great”

hymn: “I sing the mighty power of God”

reading: Genesis 1

hymn: “Each breath is borrowed air”

Here, Psalm 90 sets the stage in two short verses that are cosmic and solemn. This quality is easily continued by the emergence of “Many and great” (possibly sung by all, or possibly by a solo voice with the congregation humming the tonic note as a drone). If “I sing the mighty power of God” follows immediately, how will it begin? Can it just break in suddenly and forcefully, or is a transition better? Perhaps an introduction with a steady crescendo is helpful, so that the first hymn’s quietness is not thrust aside too soon. If a transition is not wanted, what about re-locating the narration?

Option 3:

hymn: “Many and great”

reading: Psalm 90: 1-2

hymn: “I sing the mighty power of God”

reading: Genesis 1

hymn: “Each breath is borrowed air”

Here, “Many and great” is the beginning, which might work well as an emergence out of silence; and the narration now functions as a bridge between hymns. Its final three words, “you are God,” have one effect preceding “Many and great” and a different one preceding “I sing the mighty power of God”

What about the second narration? Genesis 1 (the first creation story) is fairly long, far longer than the subsequent hymn. Will that make the pairing top-heavy with speech? Even with editing, it may still be disproportional to the hymn. What about another choice?

Option 4:

hymn: “Many and great”

reading: Psalm 90: 1-2

hymn: “I sing the mighty power of God”

reading: Genesis 2

hymn: “Each breath is borrowed air”

Here, the Genesis narration is changed to Chapter 2 (the second creation story). It is far shorter, and it has the added benefit of ending with God’s breathing life into the newly created human—a perfect bridge into the hymn, “Each breath is borrowed air.” Because the “breath” reference is quick and the passage short, it allows the hymn to do its own work, expanding the narration rather than merely echoing it.

Options 2 or 3 can be combined with the change in Option 4. The more didactic opening of Option 1 is still possible, but it seems far less effective than the partnered poetry of scripture and song. Whatever the final version, the decisions have been made on how the narration and the hymns share the work of articulating the theme.

We can see the interweaving trajectories of a hymn festival. One is narrative: the journey articulated by the theme and the narrations. Another is theological: the cumulative witness, affirmation, and prayer uttered both in narrations and in sung texts. A third is musical: the expressive rise and fall, tension and release that manifests in musical textures of voices, instruments, styles, and space. Assembling the elements of narration and song demands careful attention, so that in the end there is one arc, accomplished by the partnership of elements.

Other Arts

A hymn festival may be primarily a music-oriented event, but by extension, it celebrates the gifts of art to illuminate theology and words. As a festive occasion, it easily welcomes other art forms. If a festival is geared towards a particular liturgical season, how can colors and images reflect that? The festival narrations may include scriptural stories or parables; how might these be enacted? Dance may be a natural to include as well. In our time, it is easy to imagine ways that technological elements could interweave as well. These considerations may also widen the possibilities for including the gifts of the community.

Caution: Creativity


Hymn festivals thrive on creativity, and we rightly celebrate God's gifts of created songs and variety in singing and leading. But there is also a helpful caution related to accompaniments and arrangements. Imaginative accompaniments can delight and thrill; their goal, though, is to reveal more about the songs and to inspire more in our singing—leading to the still deeper purpose of revealing more about God and God's calls to us. Even at a hymn festival, music's prominence is still a partner to a larger purpose. This may translate, in practical terms, to "less is more." There can be too many ideas, too many embellishments, even too much leadership. Not every treatment of a song helps the song. There is a wondrous joy in ordinariness. Hymns and songs become heart-song—in memory, traditions, communities, or hymnals—because of their inherent power, their own wholeness. Regular hymns and plain singing may be just as magical at a hymn festival as elaborate settings and arrangements.

Appreciation

A hymn festival is a gift and gratitude is appropriate. How gratitude is expressed needs to be organic to the occasion and to the community. The excitement of an event, the gifts of leadership, the cumulative energy of singing, often need release. A hymn festival differs from worship in that applause may be an appropriate response, particularly if directions are given to "please hold your applause to the end." There may be other times when the nature and particularly the ending of a festival suggests no applause and then people might be invited to thank the musicians and leaders personally afterwards.

Beyond the Festival

Much is demanded of our faith communities and therefore of our song. We live with, and often are complicit in, too many disparities: racial division, LGBTQ inequality, economic injustice, political disenfranchisement, neighborhood hunger. "Who'll be a witness?" asks the spiritual. There is a witness to common ground that the church's singing is able to give, and a hymn festival can do what hymns themselves are intended to do: to point us to other things. It may point us to the multi-denominational, multi-lingual, multi-national directions that our song and worship need to take. It may be offered to the community as a benefit or fundraiser. In the Presbyterian Church (USA), the *Book of Order* calls the church to be a "provisional demonstration of what God intends for all humanity." Surely the church in our time needs more demonstration, more witness of what is singable and doable together.

Songs allow us to voice theology with confidence, with beauty, and with each other. They will not solve economic, political, or racial crises, but they may offer common ground, meeting points, and the soul's shared languages. They can empower our witness. They can help it to be kind, to shine and be gracious, to extend a hand. They can give our witness a voice that can be echoed and joined, enabling all present to share, long afterwards, the psalmist's words: "These things I remember, as I pour out my soul: how I went with the throng, and led them in procession to the house of God, with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival" (Psalm 42.4). 

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