



Per Harling Honored as Fellow by The Hymn Society

I first met Per Harling through one of his songs. His samba-inflected “Du är helig, Du är hel/You are holy, You are whole” was being presented to the task force for the 1997 *Book of Praise for the Presbyterian Church in Canada*. As we sang it, I could hardly contain my excitement. One of our guiding documents, a 1989 statement of the Presbyterian Church, encouraged congregations to envision worship services as joyful and full of meaning, with music lively and varied. Per’s song embodied all of those qualities, dancing with joy and festivity on a strong biblical and theological foundation. (For the record, I did not manage to contain my excitement. A table-top, played as a drum, becomes surprisingly ecumenical.) The song, perhaps the best-known of his more than 600 published texts, tunes, and arrangements, appears in *The Book of Praise* and in collections in Norway, Denmark, Finland, Brazil, Argentina, El Salvador, Canada, USA, Australia, New Zealand, Germany, France, Austria, Taiwan, Russia, and Great Britain.

Per Harling’s ministry as a composer, a pastoral musician, and a congregational song leader, is ecumenical, local, and global. I was able to personally experience him at work several times at the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Geneva (ELCG) during my five years with the World Council of Churches in Geneva. Harling was pastor of the Swedish Church in Lausanne from 2007–2012 and, at the invitation of liturgist and music director Terry MacArthur, brought his choir to Geneva to join with ours to perform his 1993 congregational mass, *Träd in I dansen/Step into the Dance*. On both occasions, making music and sharing worship with him confirmed what I had already experienced in his songs: he draws from a Lutheran love of hymnody and from the richness and deep meaning of his Scandinavian heritage.

Harling’s contribution to congregational song is a theological coat of many colours. His “Now the morning light has broken,” is a hymn of personal experience, to my ears almost Wesleyan in its depiction of doubt, struggle, and finally acceptance in the life of faith. His commitment to singing of justice and peace is reflected in his choice of songs to set to music and to translate. His setting of Shirley Erena Murray’s text “Peace must be dared,” itself an elaboration of a seminal quotation from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, is an infectious and challenging clarion call, reminding us why those who make peace are blessed. As a member of the Global Praise Program of the United Methodist Church, Harling translated songs by Scandinavian writers, such as Danish hymn-writer Merete Wendler’s “Du satte dig selve /You came down to earth,” which reminds us that Christ calls us to “oppose all those who oppress.”

In his article on Per Harling for the *Canterbury Dictionary of Hymnology*, David Scott Hamnes notes that he worked as secretary for the hymnal supplement *Psalmer i 1990-talet*, part of a reform of the service life of the Swedish church, and that Harling’s work was featured in two Swedish television series on contemporary congregational song, in the late 1980s and in 1999–2000. Among the number of honours he has received is

the Swedish Royal medal of the 8th Seraphim order granted to him in 2011, for his “valuable and diverse work for the church, both in Sweden and abroad.”

When collaborating with others, one of Harling’s characteristic responses is “I have a song for that” or “Actually, I have three songs for that.” On the rare occasion that no song comes to his mind, he has been known to say, “I will write a song for that.”

At the same time, delighted as he is to share his own songs, Harling is just as enthusiastic about songs and ideas that others contribute. In Terry MacArthur’s words, Harling brings his star talent to congregational singing “without his brilliance washing out all other light.” Harling will add whatever is needed, always ready to sing, not just as leader, but participating profoundly in worship as part of the congregation.

We have all been enriched by the joy, the ministry, and the work of Per Harling, “in Sweden and abroad.” It gives me great delight to join in welcoming him as Fellow of The Hymn Society in the United States and Canada.

This information was prepared by Andrew Donaldson, FHS, and is provided for release by J. Michael McMahon, Executive Director of The Hymn Society in the United States and Canada, 5 Thomas Circle, NW, 4th floor, Washington, DC 20005-4153. For more information, please contact Dr. McMahon at mike@thehymnsociety.org or 800-843-8966.

Founded in 1922, The Hymn Society in the United States and Canada is an ecumenical organization of people who are passionate about hymns and congregational song. The Hymn Society community, open to all, is made up of scholars, church musicians, poets, composers, choir directors, choir members, clergy, worship planners, song leaders, music publishers, music educators, and people who love to sing. We believe that the holy act of singing together shapes faith, heals brokenness, transforms lives, and renews peace. Our mission, therefore, is to encourage, promote, and enliven congregational song.