

Journal of Congregational Song

VOLUME 77 • NO. 2 • SPRING 2026



IN THIS ISSUE

Evaluating the CCLI Top 100
(and Beyond)

Sanctified Vetting

Can Reformed Theologies and
CCLI Top Songs Harmonize?

Does the Battle Belong?



THE HYMN SOCIETY

ANNUAL CONFERENCE

July 19-22, 2026

Princeton Theological Seminary

Princeton, New Jersey

SING!

THE
CENTER FOR
CONC&EGATIONAL
SONG

rebirth

SINGING DEATH, SINGING LIFE

REGISTRATION: www.thehymnsociety.org/event



KERI DAY



MIRIAM SPIES



NATE STUCKY



MYRON SAUDER



JEROME WEAVER



MARK MILLER, FHS



BRAXTON SHELLEY



MARCELL SILVA STEUERNAGEL



KEN MEDEMA



ERIC PLUTZ



MEG HARPER



PATTY THEL



MINA CHOI



NOEL WERNER



MELISSA HAUPT



MARTIN TEL



Journal of Congregational Song

VOLUME 77 • NO. 2 • SPRING 2026

2 Editor's Note

3 From the Executive Director

5 From the President

7 From the Director of Research

8 News

9 Candidates for the Executive Committee

11 Four New Fellows of The Hymn Society

FEATURES

21 Evaluating the CCLI Top 100 (and Beyond): An Ecumenical Roundtable

Sarah Kathleen Johnson

26 Sanctified Vetting: Negotiating United Methodist Identity through Contemporary Worship Music

Nelson Cowan and Deborah Ann Wong

39 Can Reformed Theologies and CCLI Top Songs Harmonize?

Jeremy Perigo and Adam A. Perez

51 Does the Battle Belong? Complexifying Anabaptist Approaches to Violent Language in Contemporary Worship Music

Sarah Kathleen Johnson, Anneli Loepp Thiessen, and Mykayla Turner

COLUMNS

65 Using Hymnary.org for Research

Exploring Translations

Tina Schneider, FHS

71 Book Review

Shapers of The Hymnal 1982

68 Copyright Matters

Attribution: Creation, Personality, and Copyright Law

Anne T. Gilliland

ON THE COVER Hymn festival led by Leslie Jordan at the 2023 Annual Meeting of The Hymn Society in Montreal. Photo by Glen Richardson.



EDITOR'S NOTE

I AM EXCITED to share this unique issue of the *Journal of Congregational Song* with readers. This issue features a roundtable series of articles focused on denominational analyses of the most widely sung contemporary worship songs, as found in the CCLI Top 100 list. This roundtable was originally presented at the Christian Congregational Music conference at Ripon College, Cuddesdon, UK, in August 2025. I am grateful to the authors for submitting their presentations for publication in the *Journal of Congregational Song*: Nelson Cowan and Deborah Ann Wong writing about the United Methodist process; Jeremy Perigo and Adam A. Perez writing about the Reformed process; and Sarah Kathleen Johnson, Anneli Loepp Thiessen, and Mykayla Turner writing about the Anabaptist process. I am especially grateful to Sarah Kathleen Johnson, who took the lead in organizing the roundtable submission, and who wrote the introduction to the series of articles.

This issue could not have happened without the significant work of Marcell Silva

Steuernagel, who served as guest editor for the articles in the roundtable. Because I am married to the roundtable coordinator and contributing author, Sarah Kathleen Johnson, Marcell Silva Steuernagel served in this capacity in order to avoid any conflict of interest. I was not involved in any editorial decisions or revisions to any of the articles. Instead, Marcell Silva Steuernagel took the lead on bringing the articles to the Editorial Advisory Board for review and working with the authors to revise and finalize the contents of the articles. Thank you, Marcell!

In addition to the roundtable articles, this issue also includes our usual excellent offerings of columns, including an exploration of translations in Hymnary.org; a discussion of attribution and copyright law for creative work; and a review of Marty Wheeler Burnett's *Shapers of The Hymnal 1982*. Finally, don't miss the bios of the four new Fellows of The Hymn Society!

Carl Bear (he/him/his)
editor@thehymnsociety.org

EDITOR

Carl Bear

editor@thehymnsociety.org**EDITORIAL ADVISORY BOARD**

Chris Ángel, St. Paul, MN
 Stephanie Budwey, Nashville, TN
 Marcell Silva Steuernagel, Dallas, TX
 Becca Whitla, Saskatoon, SK

CONTRIBUTING EDITORS

Beverly Howard, Book Reviews
 Tina Schneider, FHS, Using Hymnary.org for Research
 Martin Hoondert and Mykayla Turner,
 Decolonizing Congregational Song
 Anne T. Gilliland, Copyright Matters
 Tina Schneider, FHS, Dissertations

DESIGN & PRODUCTION

Elizabeth J. Asborno

ADVERTISING

Hymn Society Office
 (800) THE-HYMN

mike@thehymnsociety.org**THE HYMN SOCIETY****EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE**

Charles D. Frost, Beaufort, SC *President*
 Melissa D. Haupt, Princeton, NJ *President-Elect*
 Hilary Seraph Donaldson, Toronto, ON *Immediate Past President*
 Stephanie Budwey, Nashville, TN *Director of Research*
 Megan Mash, Chapel Hill, NC *Secretary*
 Kai Ton Chau, Grand Rapids, MI *Treasurer*
 Felicia Patton, Chicago, IL *Member-at-Large*
 Christopher de Silva, Los Angeles, CA *Member-at-Large*
 Maria Monteiro, San Antonio, TX *Member-at-Large*
 J. Michael McMahon *Executive Director, ex officio*

DICTIONARY OF NORTH AMERICAN HYMNOLOGYwww.hymnary.org

Tina Schneider, FHS *Editor*
 The Ohio State University at Lima
 4240 Campus Dr., Lima, OH 45804
schneider.290@osu.edu

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

J. Michael McMahon
 The Hymn Society in the U. S. and Canada
 5 Thomas Circle, NW, 4th Floor
 Washington, DC 20005-4153
 800-THE-HYMN (800-843-4966)
mike@thehymnsociety.org
www.thehymnsociety.org

**DIRECTOR**

Brian Hehn

brian@thehymnsociety.org

FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

BY THE TIME you read this issue of the *Journal of Congregational Song*, spring will be in full bloom throughout North America. As I write this column, however, I'm looking out the window at seven inches of snow on the ground and watching the thermometer hover below freezing. Yet I hold on to the hope that spring—with all its promise of renewal—won't be denied.

As I anticipate spring, I'm thinking a lot about our upcoming Annual Conference at Princeton Theological Seminary focused on the theme of "Rebirth: Singing Death, Singing Life." I'm excited to read through the program and to check out the rich diversity of leadership that will guide our conversations and singing together. I'm looking forward to engaging the vital questions of creation care, sustainability, disability, and justice that our theme invites us to explore.

This dreaming of spring on a cold winter day naturally turns my thoughts to Easter, rebirth, and renewal—and to the hymns and songs that have marked the celebrations of Holy Week and Easter throughout my life.

Thoughts of spring prompt me to hope for renewal and rebirth in our communities and nations. I'm yearning for a world governed not by power, lethality, and wealth, but by reverence for God's creation, welcome for the stranger, just sharing of resources, respect for human dignity, and peace rooted in justice. The Easter mystery that we sing at this season brings, in the words of Brian Wren, FHS, "good news to this and every age," no matter how deep the wounds or severe the pain. In "Christ is alive!" Wren bids us sing:

In every insult, rift, and war
where color, scorn, or wealth divide,
Christ suffers still, yet loves the more,
and lives, where even hope has died.

Our belief in new life and our hope for renewal are at the heart of our common song. We dare to join our voices—and our lives—to proclaim justice in the face of oppression and life in the face of death. Christ is alive: How can we keep from singing?

Sing a new song!

J. Michael McMahon (he/him/his)
Executive Director

COMMUNITY • ADVOCACY • RESOURCES

We are a member-led nonprofit of professional musicians and clergy serving in the Episcopal Church and internationally within the Anglican Communion.



ASSOCIATION OF
ANGLICAN
MUSICIANS

Serving the Episcopal Church

FOUNDED 1966

Resources for Musicians and Clergy

annual conference • professional journal • placement service • internships • lay advocacy •
collegial support network • professional development grants • musical resources

anglicanmusicians.org

© 2026, The Hymn Society in the United States and Canada, Inc. *Journal of Congregational Song* (ISSN 0018-8271) is published in Winter, Spring, Summer, and Autumn by The Hymn Society in the United States and Canada, Inc., 5 Thomas Circle, NW, 4th Floor, Washington, DC 20005-4153. Call toll-free at (800) THE-HYMN. Periodical postage paid at Washington, DC, and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *Journal of Congregational Song*, 5 Thomas Circle, NW, 4th Floor, Washington, DC 20005-4153.

MEMBERSHIP/SUBSCRIPTION

Regular membership (individual), \$95 per year; Retired, \$50 per year; Student, \$40 per year; Institutional subscription, \$115 per year; Life membership, \$2,000. Single copies of past issues of *Journal of Congregational Song*, \$8 per copy for members of The Hymn Society; \$10 for non-members.

EDITORIAL POLICY

Journal of Congregational Song is a peer-reviewed journal of congregational song for church musicians, clergy, scholars, poets, and others with varied backgrounds and interests. A journal of research and opinion, containing practical and scholarly articles, *Journal of Congregational Song* reflects diverse cultural and theological identities, and also provides exemplary hymn texts and tunes in various styles. Opinions expressed in *Journal of Congregational Song* are not necessarily those of the Editor or of The Hymn Society.

CORRESPONDENCE

Correspondence, according to its nature, should be directed to either the Executive Director at The Hymn Society's offices or directly to the Editor.

J. Michael McMahon, Executive Director

(mike@thehymnsociety.org):

Permission to reproduce materials

Membership

Literature of The Hymn Society

Back issues of *The Hymn* and *Journal of Congregational Song*

Change of address

Materials for *The Stanza*

Carl Bear, Editor, *Journal of Congregational Song*

(editor@thehymnsociety.org):

Content of *Journal of Congregational Song*

Submission of articles

Style sheets for writers

Materials appearing in *Journal of Congregational Song* may not be reproduced without written permission from the Executive Director. For permission to reproduce hymn texts and tunes copyrighted by The Hymn Society, write Hope Publishing Co., Carol Stream, IL 60188, or call (800) 323-1049.

Articles, columns, and book reviews in *Journal of Congregational Song* are available in their entirety through *ProQuest Religion* and *International Index to Music Periodicals*. Articles, columns, and book reviews are indexed in the *Religion Database* published by the American Theological Library Association (ATLA). Articles and columns are indexed and abstracted in *Religious and Theological Abstracts* and *RILM (Répertoire International de Littérature Musicale)*. Articles and columns are indexed in *Christian Periodical Index* and *Music Index*. Full text content is available electronically through *RILM Abstracts of Music Literature with Full Text*. Back issues up through 2015 may be found at *Hathi Trust Digital Library*.



FROM THE PRESIDENT

GREETINGS ON A cold winter day. As I write this article, I know that much of the country is engulfed in extremely cold weather. Many areas are battling snow and ice. For parts of the country, this is an unusual winter happening. I am in Beaufort, South Carolina, where our temperatures are unusually cold. For this Northerner from New Jersey who lived in Michigan for a number of years, I find it cold but survivable, knowing it is for a short period of time as opposed to the months of this weather I was used to experiencing.

While we may bemoan the weather conditions, there are many more things to look forward to and to be excited about. The Hymn Society is offering many of these opportunities. As I write this article, there are over twenty people enrolled in the hymn class which is being taught by Michael Hawn, FHS. Our webinars and interviews with people in the field of hymnody are always special times of getting acquainted with people we may not know and learning about their development and what influenced them in church music and hymnody.

As I think of our many times together during this year, I look forward to our Annual Conference this summer in Princeton, New

I am excited about our conference program. This year we will have the opportunity to participate in some new and exciting offerings which are unique to the Princeton area.

Jersey, on the campus of Princeton Theological Seminary. First, I look forward to returning to the town of Princeton. I spent six years there when I was a student at Westminster Choir College. It is a beautiful town. The shops, large old homes with their sprawling yards, and the campus of Princeton University are very inviting. The Princeton University Chapel is a beautiful Gothic structure. The stained-glass windows, wood carvings, and the magnificent organ make this a special place to sit and meditate or to worship. I am excited about our conference program. This year we will have the opportunity to participate in some new and exciting offerings which are unique to the Princeton

area. I hope you will take advantage of this conference and will invite others to join us. I know you will not be disappointed. I am grateful to the planning team for their willingness to think outside of the box.

Writing this article reminds me of how blessed we are to have an organization like The Hymn Society. I am also blessed to serve as your President. It may be cold outside, but the thought of being with you in many different ways online or in person warms my heart. I'm looking forward to seeing you.

Charles D. Frost (he/him/his)
president@thehymnsociety.org



GALA

2026

American Guild of Organists
ENDOWMENT FUND DISTINGUISHED ARTIST
CONCERT AND GALA BENEFIT RECEPTION
HONORING
CRAIG PHILLIPS

Friday, May 8 | All Saints' Church | Beverly Hills
www.agohq.org/2026-gala



FROM THE DIRECTOR OF RESEARCH

I WOULD LIKE to share two updates that relate to the work of the Academic Concerns Committee. First, we have now launched The Hymn Society Academic Forum! This is a space where teachers and researchers can ask questions related to congregational song. We have already seen lots of lively discussions as folks are asking questions, offering answers, and sharing resources. For more information on the Forum and the posting guidelines, see <https://thehymnsociety.org/resources/academic-forum/>. Membership in this Google group is open to Hymn Society members, and if you would like to join, please send an email to office@thehymnsociety.org with “Academic Forum” in the subject line. Thank you to Anneli Loepp Thiessen and Paul Richardson, FHS, for serving as moderators!

Second, after a successful presence at the American Academy of Religion (AAR) conference in Boston in November 2025, we are happy to report that our proposal for the 2026 AAR conference in Denver has been accepted! The Hymn Society is a related scholarly organization at the AAR, and we now also have an exploratory session in Liturgy, Song, and Theology, co-chaired by Lisa Hancock and Becca Whitla. The theme

for the 2026 conference is “Future/S,” and our focus this year will be “Liturgy as Resistance Towards God’s Future.” This will include a pub sing that incorporates songs of resistance as well as a related scholarly organization session that focuses on the use of song in protest, particularly in the United States over the past few months, as seen in the work of such groups as Singing Resistance. Additionally, the exploratory session in Liturgy, Song, and Theology will lead a panel on this topic:

From Jesus overturning tables in the temple, to the Wesley brothers’ preaching in the fields, to Civil Rights leaders marching against injustice while singing “This Little Light of Mine” and “We Shall Overcome,” to masses celebrated in ecclesial base communities in Latin America, to funerals under Apartheid in South Africa, to the arrest of one hundred clerics arrested for civil disobedience in Minneapolis this year, the spaces, preaching, singing, and praying of the Christian tradition have been places of encounter and theological sites that resist evil and oppression. In this roundtable, we bring together theologians, liturgists, and hymnologists to discuss the role of liturgy in forming worshipers theologically, ethically,

and practically for the work of resisting evil and building the Kin-dom of God, God's beloved community here, now, and into the future. With scholarly engagement from Trans, queer, decolonial, anti-racist, disability/anti-ableist, systematic theology, and practical theology perspectives, this dialogue explores how the *leitourgia*—the work of the people—rehearses and prepares the people for the work of speaking truth to power, non-violent

protest, and enfleshing futures built on mutual care and the flourishing for all God's creation.

For those of you who either live in Denver or will be attending the conference in November, we encourage you to join us for the pub sing, related scholarly organization session, and exploratory session panel!

Stephanie A. Budwey (she/her/hers)
stephanie.a.budwey@vanderbilt.edu

NEWS

The Hymn Society Launches Academic Forum

The Hymn Society is pleased to announce the inauguration of The Hymn Society Academic Forum, a new online space for scholarly exchange among members engaged in academic research and teaching related to congregational song.

This moderated Google Group provides a venue for sharing research in progress, posing questions to colleagues, announcing calls for papers and grant opportunities, and engaging in collegial discussion about the study of congregational song. The Forum complements our Annual Conference and *Journal of Congregational Song* by offering ongoing conversation between conferences and journal issues and creating community among scholars in our field. Membership in the Academic Forum is open to Hymn Society members who are actively involved in academic research or teaching.

To learn more about the Academic Forum's purpose and guidelines, visit <https://thehymnsociety.org/resources/academic-forum/>. To request membership in the group, send a message to office@thehymnsociety.org and write "Academic Forum" in the subject line. In your message, please verify you are a current member of The Hymn Society.

The Story of Who We Are

For more than a century, The Hymn Society has helped shape how the church sings—navigating seismic shifts in worship, theology, and culture along the way. Paul A. Richardson, FHS, chronicles that remarkable journey with depth and care in *A Calling and A Community: The Hymn Society, 1922–2021*. Whether you're a longtime member or just discovering our community, this is essential reading. Order your copy today at giamusic.com.

CANDIDATES FOR THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

The Executive Committee of The Hymn Society presents the following members as candidates to serve on the Executive Committee.

For President-Elect: M. Milner Seifert

Nominated to serve two years as President-Elect, two years as President, and two years as Immediate Past President

M. Milner Seifert joined The Hymn Society when he registered for the 1998 Annual Conference in Grand Rapids. Since that time, he has become a life member, only missing conferences when family matters prevented attending. He has presented sectionals at two different conferences, and he co-hosted a local event in Park Ridge, Illinois, during the launch of The Center for Congregational Song. Milner has contributed reviews to *The Hymn* (now *Journal of Congregational Song*) from time to time. He regularly joins the online webinars and interviews.

Milner taught choral music at Evanston Township High School for 34 years. His part-time “retirement job” was 19 years of teaching church music and overseeing music for chapel worship at Seabury-Western Theological Seminary and its successor organization, Bexley Seabury Seminary. Concurrent with his high school teaching and much of his seminary teaching, Milner



served as choir director in three different Episcopal congregations over a span of 42 years. Milner served a six-year term on the Episcopal Church’s Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music. He has led several parish and diocesan workshops on liturgy and music.

During the past ten years, Milner has served on the board of the Evanston Dance Ensemble, an incredible group of 12-18-year-olds who perform at the highest pre-professional level. He has served three years as secretary and five as president of the board.

Milner earned a Bachelor of Music Education from George Peabody College of Education and a Master of Music in music history and literature from Northwestern University. He also has a certificate in liturgical studies from the University of Notre Dame.

Milner and his wife Dale live in Evanston, Illinois, where they are members of St. Mark’s Episcopal Church. Each has served a three-year term on its vestry.

For Treasurer: Kai Ton Chau

Nominated to serve a second two-year term as Treasurer

Kai Ton Chau is a program manager at the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, where he leads curriculum development in cultural intelligence in ministry. He also teaches



worship and culture as an adjunct professor at Calvin University and serves as a staff mentor for chapel planning at Calvin Theological Seminary. He holds a doctorate in worship studies (The Robert E. Webber Institute for Worship Studies), an Ed.D. in organizational development and leadership (Cornerstone University), and master's degrees in choral music (Conservatory of Music, University of Missouri–Kansas City) and business (Laurentian University). Kai Ton has a professional background in accounting, finance, and taxation. His research interests include cultural intelligence in ministry, the role of character strengths and well-being for worship leaders, and pastoral ministry for worship leaders. He is now completing his first two-year term as Treasurer on the Executive Committee of The Hymn Society, and previously served as Secretary (2021-2023).

For Director of Research: Anneli Loepp Thiessen

Nominated to serve a three-year term as Director of Research

Anneli Loepp Thiessen is Assistant Professor of Music at Canadian Mennonite University in Winnipeg, Manitoba. She is a musicologist/ethnomusicologist who focuses on questions of gender, justice, representation, and agency in church music. She holds a PhD in Interdisciplinary Research in Music from the University of Ottawa, where her dissertation used interviews with women in the Nashville-based Christian music industry to consider how they navigate socially and



religiously restrictive environments as songwriters, recording artists, and worship leaders. A songwriter and pianist, Anneli served on the committee for the Mennonite *Voices Together* hymnal (2020) and frequently leads worship for local and national events.

For Member-at-Large: Ruth Anderson

Nominated to serve a three-year term as Member-at-Large

Ruth Anderson is an ordained deacon in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, vested in 1987. She holds a BA in vocal music education and organ from Luther College, with graduate studies at Westminster Choir College and Gettysburg Seminary. As a choir director, organist and worship leader for over 40 years, Ruth has served Lutheran and Episcopal congregations in the Midwest and the East before accepting her most recent call to central Washington State.

Beyond parish ministries, Ruth enjoys serving with leaders in her local communities as well as synodical and national expressions of the church. She is active in the ecumenical work of the American Guild of Organists, The Hymn Society, and the Association of Lutheran Church Musicians. She got hooked on gathering with her “tribe” of Hymn Society members at the 2007 conference in Ottawa. Since then, she has enjoyed serving THS as a book and organ literature reviewer, a hymn festival organist, a member of sub-committees and a co-sectional leader during conferences. Ruth lives her passion to equip people for music ministry.



FOUR NEW FELLOWS OF THE HYMN SOCIETY

DURING ITS OCTOBER and December 2025 meetings, the Executive Committee voted to name four new Fellows of The Hymn Society. The new Fellows will be formally recognized at the banquet dinner to be held on Wednesday, July 22, during the Annual Conference at Princeton Theological Seminary.

Beverly Howard, FHS

Beverly Ann Howard was born in New Kensington, Pennsylvania, to parents who were active church members. Her mother played piano and sang hymns, so a young Beverly was introduced to her future career as a church musician, hymnologist, editor of a scholarly journal, member of a hymnal committee, and organist. Beverly received degrees from the University of Oklahoma (BM, 1973, MM, 1974) in organ performance, and from the University of North Texas (DMA, 1986) in organ performance, harpsichord, and music theory. For forty years she served as organist for two congregations in Riverside, California: First Christian Church (1977-88) and Calvary Presbyterian Church (1988-2017). Beverly worked as a professor at California Baptist University (1977-2017) and chaired the Division of Fine Arts (1990-96). The university recognized her in 2005 with the Trustees Distinguished Professor Award. She joined with trumpeter Larry Johansen to form



Ventus Musicus, a duo dedicated to performing 20th-century literature for trumpet and organ. They performed concerts and workshops throughout the United States, premiering new works at conferences of the International Trumpet Guild.

As a university professor, Beverly's strong interest in pedagogy and writing came together in her passion for hymnology. This led to teaching courses in hymnology and music in worship. Numerous publications followed in scholarly journals, magazines, and books, such as *Hymns and Hymnody: Historical and Theological Introductions*; *The Changing World Religion Map*; *Presbyterians Today*; and *Call to Worship: Liturgy, Preaching, Music, and the Arts*. Beverly has also contributed entries to the *Canterbury Dictionary of Hymnology*, and columns for the online *Baptist News Global*. She is a contributor to the third revised edition of *Sing with Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Hymnology*, published as *Sing with Understanding: An Introduction to the Theology of Christian Congregational Song* (2022).

Beverly participated as a committee member on two hymnals: *Celebrating Grace: Hymnal for Baptist Worship* (Macon, Georgia, 2010) and *Glory to God: The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville, Kentucky, 2013). To both committees she brought her unique blend of scholarship and practical experience in local congregations. In support of the development of *Glory to God*, Beverly supplied articles for *Presbyterians Today* and *Leader Reader*. With Mary Louise Bringle,

FHS, she co-authored a series of Advent and Lent studies for *The Thoughtful Christian*. In 2023 she contributed hymn selections for the Presbyterian Church (USA) journal *Call to Worship: Worship Aids for the Revised Common Lectionary: Advent 2023 through Reign of Christ 2024*.

The Hymn Society Conference in San Diego (1995) was Beverly's first time to attend one of our conferences in person, and, like most of us, she was immediately "hooked" and her service to the Society began soon thereafter. She was a member of the Editorial Advisory Board for our journal, *The Hymn*, from 1998-2001 and again in 2009. From 2001-2002 she wrote the Hymn Performance column, and was named Editor of *The Hymn*, serving two terms from 2003-2008. As Editor, she served as Ex-Officio member of the Executive Committee during those years. Beverly has also presented several sectionals at our annual conferences and served as organist for two conference festivals in Berkeley, California, and Redlands, California. She has contributed two feature articles in *The Hymn* (now *Journal of Congregational Song*), and is currently a contributing editor for book and media reviews.

Beverly names three projects which are her "absolute favorite, fulfilling accomplishments which supersede all others!!!"

- Editor of *The Hymn: A Journal of Congregational Song*
- Member of the Presbyterian Committee on Congregational Song which developed *Glory to God*
- Collaborating author on *Sing with Understanding: Introduction to Theology in Christian Congregational Song*

She commented further, "In addition to forming lasting relationships with incredible people, all three of these projects assisted my own growth in hymnology/theology and offered contributions to the church-at-large."

Beverly retired to Fort Worth, Texas, in 2017, where she remains active at First Presbyterian Church. That congregation recently ordained her a Ruling Elder in the Presbyterian Church (USA), seeing in her what those of us in The Hymn Society have seen, namely her leadership skills, her ability to work with others, and her quick scholarly mind. We celebrate Beverly's many gifts to our Society, and we look forward to continuing to benefit from her presence among us.

Submitted by David Eicher, FHS

Mary Nelson Keithahn, FHS

If you have attended summer conferences of the Hymn Society regularly you may remember Mary Nelson Keithahn as one of the "T-shirt Ladies" often seen sitting together at meals and evening hymn festivals, clad in colorful matching shirts, each chosen to represent a past conference they had attended. Marilyn Parolini, Norma Sondgeroth, and Margaret Nickerson, church musicians from Illinois, had welcomed Mary as a new friend upon her arrival alone from South Dakota for a conference, and she had happily become one of the "T-shirt Ladies." However, Mary is also someone else, a writer who has benefited



from the ways The Hymn Society encourages and nurtures fledgling, “up-and-coming” text and tune creators to produce new hymns for existing and future repertoire.

Mary is a native of Minnesota, born in St. Paul in 1934, graduating from Gaylord High School in 1952, and receiving her BA in Sociology from Carleton College in Northfield in 1956. She married Carleton graduate Richard Kagawa Keithahn in September that year and joined him at Yale Divinity School where she earned her Master of Religious Education degree in 1959. Her husband, by then ordained, was called as pastor of United Church of Christ congregations in Baker, Montana (1959-1966) and Benson, Minnesota (1966-1984). Mary, then a stay-at-home mother for their four children, volunteered as a church educator and children’s choir director, improved her teaching skills through Locke Bowman’s National Teacher Education Project, and began working from home as a church school curriculum writer and journalist. Empty nesters by 1984, the Keithahns then were called as a team to First Congregational Church in Belle Fourche, South Dakota. After her husband’s death in May 1986, Mary was named part-time pastor and ordained in 1987 by the Black Hills Association, South Dakota UCC Conference. In 1992 she resigned to focus on her writing, moving to Rapid City in 2006 and then to her present home in Sioux Falls in 2024.

While the Keithahns lived in Montana in the 1960s, Alice Lyon, a church musician and director of the Billings Community Youth Choir, had introduced Mary to Choristers Guild, an organization dedicated to assisting directors of choirs for children and youth with age-appropriate choral methods

and repertoire, including hymns. Austin Lovelace, FHS, was a presenter at one of the Guild workshops Mary attended, and she learned about The Hymn Society from him. Yale Divinity School had not offered a course in hymnology when she was studying there, and she was eager to learn more about the history of hymns and how they were constructed. She joined The Hymn Society soon after that workshop, bringing with her a love of singing hymns nurtured from childhood in Sunday School, youth fellowship, and congregational worship. Her mother had their church’s hymnal on the piano at home, and the church organist, who sang along on every hymn she played, encouraged her to find joy in singing and playing hymns too. Choral repertoire in high school and college had often included arrangements of hymns as well. Mary values the role hymn texts and tunes played in her own faith development, and as a pastor, educator, and writer, and has always looked for creative ways to teach and use hymns in her ministry, especially with children and youth, remembering Austin Lovelace’s comment, “Hymnody is always one generation away from extinction.”

Mary and I met when she was appointed to the Choristers Guild Board of Directors in 1984 and we were both on the publications committee. With Austin Lovelace’s encouragement, our committee developed “Our Heritage of Hymns,” a collection of resources for teaching children eight hymns a year, one from each liturgical season, over two years. Mary designed and edited the two leaders’ guides, incorporating biblical and historical background and creative teaching methods shared by various

church musicians, many of them members of The Hymn Society. The Guild also published related resources (e.g., hymn-based anthems and concertatos, dramas, handbell and Orff accompaniments, simplified organ and piano arrangements) that enriched the sparse supply of teaching materials on hymns available to local church musicians. In addition, Mary collaborated with Hymn Society member Mary Louise VanDyke, FHS, on “Exploring the Hymnal,” a collection of learning center designs to help children become familiar with their church’s hymnal.

It was during our time on the Choristers Guild board that I heard Mary complaining that church school curriculum writers were limited in writing new songs for children because their budget never allowed for original or copyrighted music. I offered to set a few texts for her and later, when I needed some new song texts to set for a curriculum project of my own, she helped me out. This was the beginning of our collaboration that has lasted forty years!

Mary also shared that she and her husband had begun incorporating biblical musical dramas into their annual vacation church schools but had searched in vain for one on the apostle Paul. She had a story from Acts in mind to dramatize and asked if I would consider composing the score if she could provide a script and lyrics. The result was “Paul & Co,” published by Choristers Guild in 1990. With Alice Lyon’s help we tried out the musical at a week-long summer Music, Art and Drama Camp that Mary initiated and directed for the South Dakota UCC Conference at Placer-ville Camp in the Black Hills. MAD Camp

was a rich learning experience for singers, age 8-15, as they learned singing techniques and anthems as a choir, sang hymns in new ways and learned more about Paul in daily worship, and at week’s end performed the memorized, costumed, full-length musical drama for family and friends. After running for eighteen consecutive years, MAD camp proved to be good training for both campers and our volunteer staff in being choir members and directors in their own congregations. It also involved us in writing a dozen musical dramas during that time, each one including a classical or new hymn at Austin Lovelace’s suggestion.

By 1991 Mary was looking for opportunities to improve her skills in writing song and anthem texts and decided to stay on after The Hymn Society’s annual conference at St. Olaf College to attend a hymnwriting workshop led by Carl P. Daw, Jr., FHS, Jaroslav Vajda, FHS, and others. Textwriters were asked to write a hymn on a psalm of their choice to be critiqued the *next* day! Mary chose Psalm 83:1 and wrote the first two stanzas of “When quiet peace is shattered,” adding a third stanza later when I set the text as an anthem (Hinshaw, 1990) as well as a hymn (HEALING VOICE). This was the first of our collaborative hymns to be included in a denominational hymnal (*Voices United*, United Church of Canada, 1996,) but not the last. The workshop had awakened Mary to her calling as a hymn writer, and we continued to collaborate. There are now five collections of our hymns in print: *Come Away with Me* (Abingdon Press, 1998), *Time Now to Gather* (Abingdon Press, 1998), *The Song Lingers On* (Zimbel Press, 2003), *Faith That Lets Us Sing* (Wayne Leupold Editions,

2017), and *Sing of All That Love Can Do* (Leupold Foundation, 2026).

In the late 1990s three of us from my church in Maryland came up with an idea for teaching important Christian concepts to children and youth, using six classic hymns paired with six of our contemporary hymns on the same themes, with comments on the biblical background of the texts, methods for teaching the tunes, and unusual art activities. Mary edited the project, and in 2000 Abingdon Press published *Something Old, Something New: Hymns to Explore, Things to Do*, two resources by Beverly Bailey, Suzi Gifford, and John D. Horman, one focused on “The Christian Year” and the other on “Who Is Jesus?”

Mary and I also collaborated in writing a three-volume series of songs for young children that were published by Augsburg Fortress: *Sing Me the Stories of Jesus* (2008), *Sing Me the Stories of God’s People* (2010), and *Sing Me the Stories of God’s NEW People* (2016). Like the songs Mary remembered from her preschool classes in Sunday School, these age-appropriate songs support the biblical content generally used in denominational curricula but also introduce young children to the format of a hymn: poetry with a consistent rhyme scheme and meter, organized in one or several stanzas, and intended to fill a specific role in worship.

Mary credits her long association with The Hymn Society with providing her the “hymnology course” that was missing from her seminary education: annual conferences with lectures and sectionals often led by living hymnwriters well-known in this country and abroad (John Bell, FHS, Andrew Pratt, Fred Kaan, FHS, and Brian

Wren, FHS), daily worship in different traditions, inspiring hymn festivals, and a “bookstore” filled with hymn collections from different writers as well as books like Austin Lovelace’s *Anatomy of Hymnody* (1965) that helped her understand the hymn as an art form. She found friends and mentors among other writers like Rae Whitney, with whom she exchanged critique, and seminary professors like Michael Hawn, FHS, who several times took the time to critique some of her work. She learned from informal conversations with text-writers like Herman Stuempfle, John Core, and Richard Leach. Articles in *The Hymn* provided continuing education and *The Stanza*, in print and then online, kept her connected with the Hymn Society throughout the year.

Forty years is a long time for a writer and musician to work together, but we continue to learn from one another. Mary has helped me understand worship as the work of *all* of God’s people, and congregational song as the means for everyone of any age to participate, and thus her concern that a hymn text be meaningful to a singer when it is first sung and more thought-provoking as it is repeated. Mary has had enough training and experience in music and choral singing to understand my concern that a hymn tune should be well-composed, supportive of the meaning and mood of the text, and singable on sight or upon hearing it played once, but never boring in repetition. After life-long ministries in local congregations, we also have a mutual understanding of the teaching and pastoral functions of hymns and have always tried to write hymns for the heart as well as the head. Each new hymn is usually preceded by conversations on what

our faith is calling us to voice in song. We are still challenged to write texts that are meaningful to people and tunes they will want to sing in worship.

There is no one from whom I have learned more about hymnology and the writing of hymn texts and tunes than Mary Nelson Keithahn. She has been a wonderful mentor, collaborator and friend and I'm honored to have been asked to write this article about her.

Submitted by John Horman

Martin Tel, FHS

Martin Tel's love of sacred music had its origin in a dairy barn in rural Washington state. In that barn, Martin listened to his father belting out Psalms and hymns while he was milking cows. The love of song formed in those days shaped Martin's musical passion and career trajectory with the result that, in 2026, Martin has been named a Fellow of the Hymn Society in recognition of a lifetime of work with congregational song.

And it is, indeed, a lifetime. In his youth, his parents shared their memories of living in the Netherlands during the Nazi occupation, with their roots in the Dutch Reformed Church and their reliance on the Psalms for sustenance and comfort. The only one of his siblings to follow his parents' passion for the Psalms into a career, Martin began playing the organ at his church at age 12. By the time he was 16 (and had gotten his driver's



license) he was playing for other churches in the area. This youthful experience solidified his conviction that worship leadership is an important part of faith formation.

Martin holds degrees from Dordt College (BA in music and Dutch), the University of Notre Dame (MMus in organ literature), Calvin Theological Seminary (MA in Christian education), and the University of Kansas (DMA in church music). Today, Martin is the C. F. Seabrook Director of Music at Princeton Theological Seminary, a post he has held since 1996.

His days are filled with directing the seminary choirs, facilitating the music ministry for daily worship, and lecturing on various areas of church music. In his words, "I still sometimes have to pinch myself—do I really get to wake up every day and go to 'work' getting people to sing?"

Prior to coming to Princeton, Martin spent a year in the Netherlands (1995-1996) as a Fulbright Scholar studying organ design and performance as well as congregational song—specifically studying the historical relationship between the voice of the organ and the voice of the congregation in the Protestant churches of the Netherlands. His research took place at the Instituut voor Liturgiewetenschap at the Rijksuniversiteit Groningen and his organ study at the Sweelinck Conservatorium of Amsterdam. He subsequently helped to design an organ for Princeton Seminary's chapel which was built by Paul Fritts and Company Organ Builders and installed in 2000.

Martin's work with hymnals has been prodigious. In 2007, Martin began serving as a contributing editor for the hymnal *Lift Up Your Hearts: Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual*

Songs, a hymnal for the Reformed Church in America and the Christian Reformed Church. Working in conjunction with Joyce Borger and John Witvliet, Martin was focused on the Psalter portion of the hymnal. As the information was collected and choices were made for this section, John suggested that the knowledge gathered in this process could be used as the starting point for an ecumenical collection exclusively focused on the Psalms. Martin then became the senior editor for *Psalms for All Seasons*, a comprehensive book of Psalm resources. This meant that Martin was working on two hymnals at the same time, necessitating that he take a partial leave of absence from his position at Princeton Seminary. *Psalms for All Seasons* was published in 2012 (CICW/Faith Alive/Brazos Press) and *Lift Up Your Hearts* was published in 2013 (Faith Alive). Martin subsequently served as a contributing editor for the hymnal *Santo, Santo, Santo: Cantos para el pueblo de Dios / Holy, Holy, Holy: Songs for the People of God* published in 2019 (GIA).

Martin's current project is the publication of a collection of songs translated from Korean. This grew out of an interest in multilingual worship at Princeton Seminary and a desire to fill a gap identified by Korean and Korean American students—a need for their culture to be honored in contemporary translations to make their worship engagement more meaningful. Together with co-editor Chang Jang of the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship (CICW), they have identified a collection of Korean hymns in current use which have not yet been translated into English. With support from CICW, they have set about having these translated—still

using their original tunes. Along the way, they are developing a philosophy of hymn translation which honors both the source and target languages. The resulting book will be supplemented by online resources, all published by GIA and planned to be available by 2027.

Martin's days are not so filled that he cannot pursue his love of congregational song through his work with The Hymn Society. A life member, he has served on the editorial board (2018-2020), delivered a plenary address for the 2021 conference (“[Re-]Framing Welcome through Song: A Field Report”), and led sectionals at various conferences. He is currently serving as the chair for the 2026 conference. Over the years, he has encouraged his students to attend conferences through the Lovelace Scholar program—including Melissa Haupt, now president-elect of the Society. Martin has also been an ambassador to The Hymn Society in Great Britain and Ireland (HSGBI), delivering a plenary address in 2025 entitled “How Can We Sing the Lord's Song in a Strange Land?: The Demise (and Resurgence) of Metrical Psalm-singing in North America” which is soon to be published by HSGBI.

Closer to home, the indefatigable Martin has served as a minister of music in Christian Reformed, Reformed Church in America, and Presbyterian congregations. He currently serves as the organist at the First Presbyterian Church of Dutch Neck, where he has served since 2010. He and his wife Sharilyn raised three now-adult children in Princeton in a home enlivened by two small dogs and a rabbit.

In a recent email, Martin reflected, “No organization has been more formative to me professionally than The Hymn Society. And this is inherited, from generation to generation. In high school I was already following the work of Emily Brink, FHS, who was then editing a new hymnal for my denomination. She was the one who introduced me to The Hymn Society. In college I was studying hymnody through the writings of Society stalwarts such as Erik Routley, FHS, and Harry Eskew, FHS. And then, as my career began, my work and research were sharpened by the likes of Alice Parker, FHS, Bob Batastini, FHS, Mel Bringle, FHS, David Eicher, FHS, Joyce Borger ... and so many others. And this continues today. The Hymn Society is so special to me.”

The Hymn Society has rightly recognized Martin’s past, current, and future contributions by naming him a Fellow.

Submitted by Jacque Browning Jones, FHS

Karen Westerfield Tucker, FHS

Karen Beth Westerfield Tucker has been named a Fellow of The Hymn Society in the United States and Canada in recognition of her contributions as a scholar and teacher of congregational song. She will receive this award at The Hymn Society’s Annual Conference in Princeton, New Jersey, in July 2026.

Born in Washington, DC, Karen grew up in Wheaton, Maryland. She began taking piano lessons at the age of five when her



parents observed her “constructing” chords on the family piano. When she was ten, her father purchased a Hammond organ for the home and switched her to organ lessons, engaging C. Marvin Fewell, then the organist at their church, as her instructor. By the age of thirteen, she was covering Sunday services for her congregation and others during summer months. From an early age, Karen enjoyed playing hymns from her family’s hymnals, and under Fewell’s tutelage she gained not only a new appreciation for hymns but also skills for accompanying congregational song.

Karen received a Bachelor of Arts degree (summa cum laude) in religion and music from Emory and Henry College (now University) in Emory, Virginia, and a Master of Divinity degree (magna cum laude) from the Duke University Divinity School in Durham, North Carolina. It was during her time at Duke that her formal interest in hymns began while taking a directed study on hymns and the liturgical year with Christian ethicist and hymn writer/composer W. Waldo Beach, who encouraged her to join The Hymn Society. Karen went on to receive a Master of Arts degree in liturgical history and a Doctor of Philosophy degree in theology (liturgical studies) from the University of Notre Dame in Notre Dame, Indiana. She returned to Duke Divinity School to teach in the areas of worship and church music as a member of that faculty from 1989 to 2004. Since 2004, she has been Professor of Worship at the Boston University School of Theology in Boston, Massachusetts, where she teaches courses on worship, sacramental theology, congregational song, and ecumenism for students at master’s and

doctoral levels. She has given lectures and taught courses on congregational song and worship/liturgy throughout North America and in Asia, Australia, and Europe. Kristian C. Kohler, a current Ph.D. candidate in liturgical studies with Karen, shares that he “first heard Professor Westerfield Tucker speak in October 2013 while a student at Yale Divinity School when she delivered the Institute of Sacred Music’s Kavanagh Lecture titled ‘Have Hymnals Become Dinosaurs? The Costs of Extinction.’ Over a decade later, Professor Westerfield Tucker continues to inspire me by her teaching, research, and mentorship, all of which she conducts with tremendous dedication. Her ecumenically-minded approach to the study of the church’s song is a gift to all those who share her passion for hymnology.”

Throughout her career, Karen has published numerous books, book chapters, articles, dictionary and encyclopedia entries, book reviews, and other resources that have contributed greatly to the scholarship on congregational song and liturgy. She has special interest in the Methodist/Wesleyan tradition: her monograph *American Methodist Worship* (Oxford, 2001), contains a chapter detailing the “Music of Methodist Worship”; and her most recent Methodist-related essay examines the theme of creation in hymns by Dan Damon, FHS, Colin Gibson, and Andrew Pratt (*Worship in Communion with Creation: Recognizing a Broader Participation* [Liturgical Press, 2026]). Her scholarship has examined hymnals as theological texts using Methodist and Civil War publications as examples. An active participant in national and international ecumenical dialogues (bilateral and multilateral), she has explored

the ecumenical implications of singing together in journal essays and in chapters published in *Hymns and Hymnody: Historical and Theological Introductions* (Cascade, 2019), and in *Exploring Christian Song* (Lexington, 2017). Her ecumenical activity also includes service as President of *Societas Liturgica* (2009–2011), editor-in-chief of *Studia Liturgica* (2005–2013), and chairperson of the Committee on Worship and Liturgy of the World Methodist Council (1996–2006). In 2023, the North American Academy of Liturgy honored her with its Berakah Award.

In addition to her work as scholar and teacher, Karen is an ordained elder in the United Methodist Church with experience as a local church pastor and as a campus minister (University of Illinois, Champaign/Urbana). She has served as a church musician for several congregations (Catholic and Protestant) and currently serves as an occasional substitute.

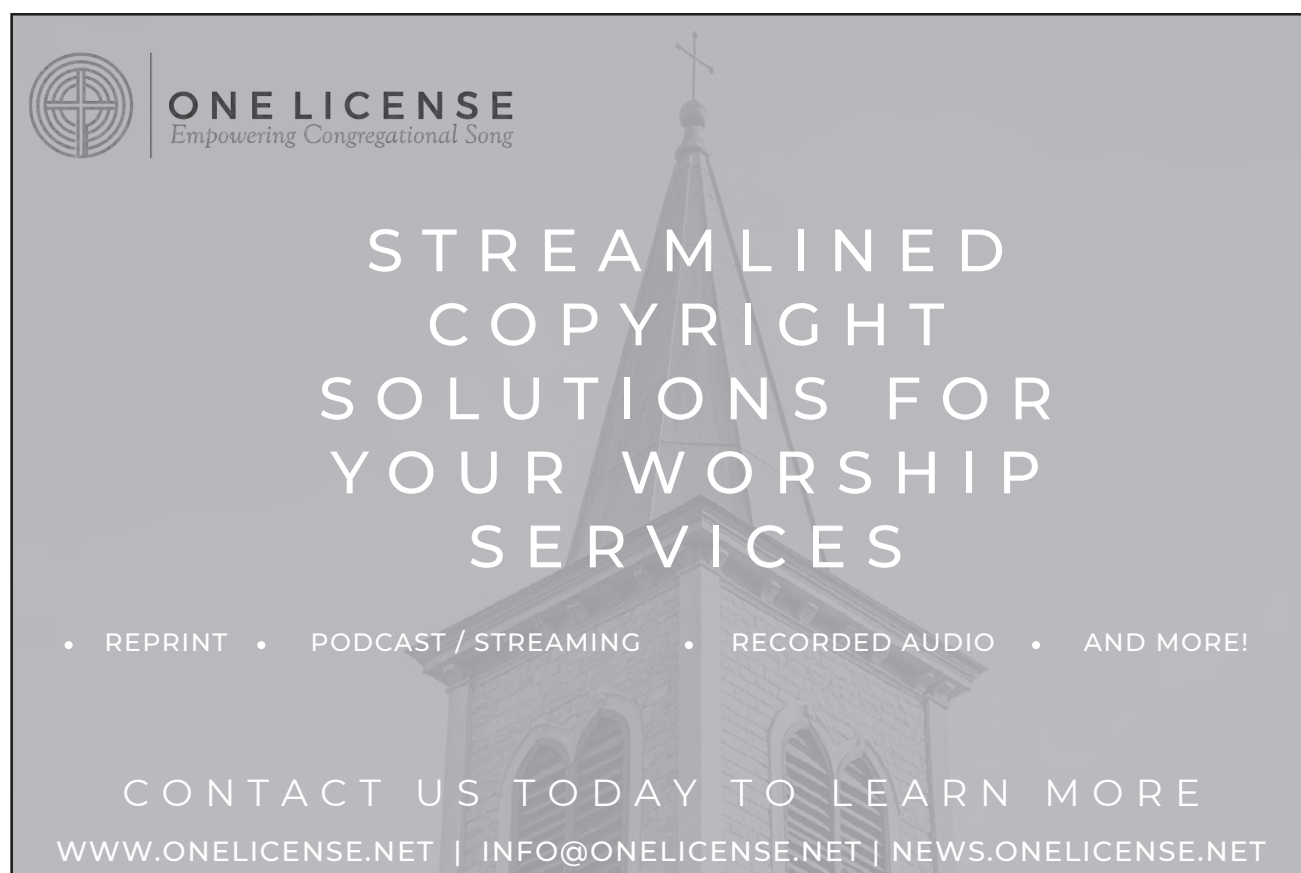
She has a published hymn tune, SENSUS FIDEI, written for Isaac Watts’ text “My Savior God, my Sov’reign Prince,” that is included in Geoffrey Wainwright’s book *For Our Salvation* (Eerdmans, 1997). Carlton R. Young, FHS, named a hymn tune for her (KAREN, included in the collection *Songs for the World*) that was composed for Charles Wesley’s text “Author of our Salvation, thee” in the 1745 *Hymns on the Lord’s Supper*. David Bjorlin, hymnwriter, Associate Professor of Worship at North Park University in Chicago, Illinois, and one of Karen’s former doctoral students, dedicated his text “O source of all knowledge” to her, writing it to express his “gratitude for her faithfulness in handing down a tradition” to him. He wrote that “in relation to hymnody

specifically, Karen's vocation as scholar and teacher demonstrated how one could take hymns seriously as a resource for the study and practice of liturgy, theology, and ecumenism. Congregational song is not an add-on to either the worship service or its study, but very often the primary source of a community's understanding of itself and the God they worship. This left an indelible mark on my own work as a liturgist, scholar, and hymnwriter."

A Life Member of The Hymn Society, Karen has given much to the organization that she joined as a seminary student, including delivering the plenary lecture "Liturgical Perspectives on Changes in North American

Hymnody in the Past Twenty-Five Years" at the Annual Conference in Grand Rapids, Michigan in 1998, assisting as a member of the review panel for the Emerging Scholars Forum from 2017 to 2018, serving on the Editorial Advisory Board of *The Hymn* (now *Journal of Congregational Song*) from 2017 to 2019, and contributing as a panelist for the Roundtable Discussion on Teaching Congregational Song in 2025. Karen, thank you for all that you have done as a scholar and teacher of congregational song. Congratulations on this well-deserved honor!

*Submitted by Stephanie Budwey,
Director of Research*



 **ONE LICENSE**
Empowering Congregational Song

STREAMLINED
COPYRIGHT
SOLUTIONS FOR
YOUR WORSHIP
SERVICES

• REPRINT • PODCAST / STREAMING • RECORDED AUDIO • AND MORE!

CONTACT US TODAY TO LEARN MORE
WWW.ONELICENSE.NET | INFO@ONELICENSE.NET | NEWS.ONELICENSE.NET

Evaluating the CCLI Top 100 (and Beyond)

An Ecumenical Roundtable

SARAH KATHLEEN JOHNSON

Understanding the CCLI Top 100

The CCLI Top 100 songs represent some of the most widely sung music in worship across Christian traditions and around the world.¹

CCLI, Christian Copyright Licensing International, manages copyright permissions for most contemporary worship songs.² Congregations purchase a license and report the songs that they sing. Since its origin in the late 1980s, CCLI has regularly released a list of the songs that congregations report singing the most—the Top 100. While the nature and style of the presentation of the lists has changed over time,

.....

EDITOR'S NOTE: This roundtable series of articles was guest edited by Marcell Silva Steuernagel to avoid a conflict of interest since the journal editor, Carl Bear, is married to roundtable coordinator and contributing author, Sarah Kathleen Johnson.

1. CCLI Top 100 lists are available for different regions worldwide. All of the roundtable projects are based on the United States lists, <https://songselect.ccli.com/ccli-top-100/us>.

2. Monique Ingalls discusses the use of the term “contemporary worship music” to refer to this repertoire. Monique Ingalls, *Singing the Congregation: How Contemporary Worship Music Forms Evangelical Community* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 6–11.

the lists remain a valuable resource for understanding which contemporary worship songs congregations are singing.³

The CCLI Top 100 is relatively stable over time, with a small subset of songs being added to or removed from the list each reporting period. Between 2015 and 2025, the approximate timeframe of the material addressed in this roundtable, only 267 distinct songs appeared on the Top 100 list, and only 68 distinct songs appeared on the Top 25. In the entire timeframe of the list (1989-2026), only 534 distinct songs have appeared on the Top 100, and 157 distinct songs on the Top 25.⁴ Therefore, it is common for older songs, such as Chris Tomlin's "How Great is Our God" (released in 2004), to appear in the Top 25 in 2025, alongside newer releases, such as "Praise" by Elevation Worship (released in 2023). In the vast sea of contemporary worship music, the CCLI Top 100 represents a stable and manageable subset of songs.

Scholars have often taken these lists as a starting point for studying contemporary worship. Analyses of this repertoire have

focused on theological themes, musical characteristics, and the origin of songs, including the social location of artists, among other questions.⁵ Worship leaders and musicians in congregations also use these lists to guide song selection. In this way, the CCLI Top 100 not only reflects what churches sing, it also shapes a canon of congregational song.

Processes Engaging the CCLI Top 100 in Different Christian Traditions

While many of the songs on the CCLI Top 100 list originate in Evangelical and Charismatic liturgical contexts, this repertoire is increasingly received across diverse expressions of worship and Christian traditions.⁶ As Anneli Loepp Thiessen and I argue, contemporary worship music is an ecumenical liturgical movement.⁷ These songs are widely sung in Mainline Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Eastern Christian spaces, in addition to their predominantly Free Church

.....

3. Worship Leader Research presents an overview of the history of the CCLI Top 100 lists as well as recent changes. Worship Leader Research, "The CCLI Top 100 Changed ... and Nobody Is Talking about It," Worship Leader Research, February 5, 2025, <https://worshipleaderresearch.com/the-ccli-top-100-changed-and-nobody-is-talking-about-it/>.

4. Adam Perez, Shannan Baker, Elias Dummer, Marc Jolicoeur, and Mike Tapper, "'Do It Again': Chart-Topping Worship Songs and the Churches behind Them," *Liturgy* 38, no. 4 (2023): 31–40, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0458063X.2023.2259766>. I am grateful to Shannan Baker for providing updated data for this article.

5. Jonathan Ottaway provides a valuable summary of repertory-based studies of contemporary praise and worship while advocating for more in-depth ethnographic and historical approaches. Jonathan Ottaway, "'I'll Bring You More Than a Song': Toward a Reassessment of Methodology in the Study of Contemporary Praise and Worship," *Religions* 14, no. 5 (2023): 680, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14050680>.

6. Monique Ingalls explores a range of contexts where contemporary worship music is engaged beyond local congregations, including conferences, concerts, and campuses. Ingalls, *Singing the Congregation*.

7. Sarah Kathleen Johnson and Anneli Loepp Thiessen, "Contemporary Worship Music as an Ecumenical Liturgical Movement," *Worship* 97 (2023): 204–229.

contexts of origin. It is therefore understandable that Christian traditions would want to approach this shared repertoire with attention to the values of their own communities.

In 2015, the United Methodist Church pioneered the process of evaluating the CCLI Top 100 with attention to Methodist theological values in order to commend certain songs for use in worship in United Methodist congregations, and to offer caution regarding the use of others.⁸ In recent years, in part due to encouragement from Brian Hehn at The Center for Congregational Song, groups from other Christian traditions have undertaken a similar process. So far, Lutheran, Reformed, and Anabaptist groups have evaluated this ecumenically shared material with their distinctive contexts in mind in order to produce practical resources to guide church leaders in song selection. While Roman Catholics have not embarked on such an analysis, this repertoire is widely used in Catholic settings and is regularly included in published missals and Catholic hymnals.⁹

Overview of the Roundtable

At the 2025 Christian Congregational Music conference, several scholars—all of whom were involved in processes based in different Christian traditions focused on evaluating the CCLI Top 100 with the aim of shaping practical resources for worship leaders—shared academic papers reflecting on what we have learned about contemporary worship music and our traditions through undertaking this work.¹⁰ This roundtable in the *Journal of Congregational Song* presents papers that reflect on the Methodist, Reformed, and Anabaptist processes of analyzing the CCLI Top 100. A paper describing the Lutheran process written by Clayton Faulkner is already published in *CrossAccent*.¹¹

The roundtable reveals that the processes for evaluating the CCLI Top 100 go far beyond creating a checklist of theological distinctives and determining whether these themes are present in the lyrics of songs. Not just the content, but each process itself reflects distinct ways of doing theology, including specific sources of theology and approaches to communal decision making.

.....

8. Discipleship Ministries: The United Methodist Church, “CCLI Top 100,” September 10, 2019, <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/articles/ccli-top-100>.

9. *Spirit and Song* (OCP) and *Voices* (GIA) are two Roman Catholic hymnals that center this repertoire. Songs from the CCLI Top 100 are also included in paperback missals. Brian Hehn presented a preliminary analysis of the presence of CCLI Top 100 songs in Catholic print resources as part of the panel at the Christian Congregational Music conference in 2025.

10. The Christian Congregation Music conference has been a center for the study of contemporary worship music and many of the scholars who participated in denominational evaluation processes are also engaged in this academic space. Sarah Kathleen Johnson, Nelson Cowan, Clayton Faulkner, Brian Hehn, Anneli Loepp Thiessen, Adam Perez, Jeremy Perigo, Mykayla Turner, and Debbie Wong, “Ecumenical CCLI Top 100 (and Beyond): An Ecumenical Roundtable,” Christian Congregational Music Conference, Oxford, England, 2025.

11. Clayton Faulkner, “Evaluating the Top 100 CCLI Songs for Use in Lutheran Assemblies,” *CrossAccent* 31, no. 3 (2023): 20–45.

The Methodists attend to themes from Wesley's hymns and reflect on how their vetting process is "sanctified" over time in alignment with values articulated by church leadership. The Reformed tradition is the only one of three groups with artists represented on the CCLI Top 100 list, and consequently the authors are able to consider songs that originate from self-consciously Reformed songwriters (specifically the "Getty platform"), with attention to how they employ classical Reformed themes like the sovereignty of God. The Anabaptists, as a historic peace church tradition, use a case study of violent language to explore how biblical hermeneutics can be applied to congregational song, and local congregations can be encouraged to function as communities of discernment.

These distinct ecclesiologies and ways of doing theology led each tradition to produce a distinct type of practical resource. The Methodist process evolved from a list of recommendations regarding the CCLI Top 100 to a guide contextualizing each song and expanding the list itself. The Reformed process produced a list of recommended songs while raising larger questions about the antagonism between the Getty platform and broader CCLI Top 100 repertoire. The Anabaptist process rejected the premise of universal recommendations in favor of a decentralized approach that empowers local communities to make these decisions.

All three articles point to how aspects of these communal structures for theological

and liturgical discernment could apply to other expressions of congregational song and aspects of church life.

Purpose of Ecumenical Reflection on the CCLI Top 100

The goal of these ecumenical discernment processes is *not* to determine whether congregations should be singing CCLI Top 100 songs at all. Instead, these processes recognize that many congregations *are* singing these songs and will continue to do so. The goal is therefore not to engage in ideological or stylistic arguments, but to invite deeper reflection on musical choices within an established repertoire. These processes are pragmatic rather than idealistic.

Like any repertoire, the CCLI Top 100 has limitations. The majority of songs on the list come from a small community of artists, primarily consisting of white American men affiliated with Evangelical and Charismatic traditions. Pauline Muir reckons with the lack of racial representation on the CCLI charts and how this body of song does not represent the breadth and depth of the Christian tradition worldwide today, including communities that rely heavily on this material.¹² There are notable and prominent exceptions, such as Canadian Roman Catholic songwriter Matt Maher ("Lord I Need You") and Nigerian artist Sinach ("Waymaker"). However, in the case of Sinach,

.....

12. Pauline Muir, "Decolonising Congregational Music," in *Black British Gospel Music: From the Windrush Generation to Black Lives Matter*, ed. Dulcie A. Dixon McKenzie, Pauline E. Muir, and Monique M. Ingalls, (Routledge, 2024), 205–26.

many people do not know that she wrote the song since it was popularized only when it was recorded by white Evangelical men.¹³ Furthermore, some of the artists represented on the list are vocally supportive of Christian nationalism in the United States or affiliated with Christian movements implicated in abuse.¹⁴ The list is driven by the music industry and shaped by economic forces.¹⁵ These concerns are not limited to contemporary worship music, and similar social and economic factors shape other repertoires of song, including hymnals.¹⁶ Many of the authors who contributed to this roundtable are actively engaged in this kind of critical scholarship of music and worship, including contemporary worship music, although it is not the focus here.

At the same time, contemporary worship music is continually evolving.¹⁷ Over the past century, this is a movement that

has reshaped worship across Christian traditions—Western and Eastern, Protestant and Catholic, Mainline and Free Church—and we can expect that it will continue to do so in the decades ahead. It is therefore wise to take the CCLI Top 100 seriously, to engage it theologically, and to explore it together—ecumenically. May this roundtable inspire ongoing theological reflection, both within the traditions represented here, and in Christian traditions that sing these songs but have not yet undertaken an intentional process of reflection on the CCLI Top 100.

Rev. Sarah Kathleen Johnson, PhD, is Associate Professor of Liturgy and Pastoral Theology at Saint Paul University in Ottawa, Canada. She served on the editorial team for *Voices Together* (MennoMedia, 2020) and is the author of *Occasional Religious Practice* (Oxford University Press, 2025).



.....

13. Anneli Loepp Thiessen, "Establishing Best Practices for Intercultural Contemporary Worship Music: A Case Study of 'Way Maker' by Sinach," *The Hymn: A Journal of Congregational Song* 74, no. 2 (2023): 15–22. It is important to recognize that this repertoire may be transformed through localization as it crosses geographic, cultural, and theological borders. Marcell Silva Steuernagel, "Transnational and Translational Aspects of Global Christian Congregational Musicking," *Religions* 12, no. 9 (2021): 732, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12090732>.

14. Adam Perez, "'It's Your Breath in Our Lungs': Sean Feucht's Praise and Worship Music Protests and the Theological Problem of Pandemic Response in the U.S.," *Religions* 13, no. 1 (2022): 47, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13010047>; Nelson Cowan, "When a Brand is Tainted: The Ethics of Song Selection in Corporate Worship," *Liturgy* 38, no. 2-3 (2023): 39–48, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0458063X.2023.2224189>.

15. David Bjorlin, "Contemporary Worship Music and the Evangelical-Capitalist Resonance Machine," *Worship* 99 (January 2025): 12–30; Worship Leader Research, "Since 2017, 100% of Top 25 Worship Songs Have Been Singles ... So What?" Worship Leader Research, June 6, 2023, <https://worshipleaderresearch.com/since-2017-100-of-the-top-25-worship-songs-were-singles-so-what/>.

16. Katie Graber and Anneli Loepp Thiessen, "Publishing Privileges the Published: An Analysis of Gender, Class, and Race in the Hymnological Feedback Loop," *Religions* 14, no. 10 (2023): 1273, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14101273>; Antonio Alonso, *Commodified Communion: Eucharist, Consumer Culture, and the Practice of Everyday Life* (Fordham University Press, 2021).

17. Swee Hong Lim and Lester Ruth, *Lovin' on Jesus: A Concise History of Contemporary Worship* (Abingdon, 2017); Lester Ruth and Lim Swee Hong, *A History of Contemporary Praise & Worship: Understanding the Ideas that Reshaped the Protestant Church* (Baker Academic, 2021).

Sanctified Vetting

Negotiating United Methodist Identity through Contemporary Worship Music

NELSON COWAN AND DEBORAH ANN WONG

In September 2014, about twenty pastors and scholars gathered in Dayton, Ohio, for a two-day symposium on the future of United Methodist worship. In a press release leading up to the event, Dawn Chesser, then Director of Preaching Ministries at Discipleship Ministries, framed the gathering in this way: “Part of what we want to talk about is how we maintain a strong United Methodist identity, even while doing nontraditional worship services. How do we do that well?”¹ Given the Wesleyan tradition of singing our faith, it is no surprise that congregational song was at the forefront of this discussion. I (Nelson) attended this gathering and recall a recurring anxiety among participants about the perceived incongruence between contemporary, band-led music and United Methodist theological commitments. In response to these concerns, Discipleship Ministries launched the CCLI² Top 100 Vetting Project in 2015. The project was an effort to curate an ever-updating catalog of songs for United Methodist worship planners and congregations, and also served as a pilot process for establishing a vetting method

.....

1. “Symposium to Explore Future of Worship in The United Methodist Church,” Central Texas United Methodists, accessed October 8, 2025, <https://www.ctcumc.org/newsdetail/669595>.

2. CCLI is an acronym for Christian Copyright Licensing International. Howard Rachinski founded a predecessor company called StarPraise in 1985, which was rebranded and launched in 1988 as CCLI.

for a potential new United Methodist hymnal.³ This article suggests that the UMC's vetting project serves as a case study in how a tradition maintains theological and liturgical integrity within a musical economy that is unintentionally ecumenical.

From its beginning, Methodism has understood that worship and music are theological acts. In the preface to the *Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People called Methodists*, John Wesley described the hymnal as "a little body of experimental and practical divinity," large enough to "contain all the important truths of our most holy religion ... arranged according to the experience of real Christians."⁴ For Wesley, the practice of congregational singing was a practice of spiritual formation—"a means of raising or quickening the spirit of devotion, of confirming faith, of enlivening hope, and of kindling and increasing love to God and man."⁵ More recently, the Wesleyan scholar and musician S.T. Kimbrough, Jr., FHS, has written, "The hymns of the church are theology. They are theological statements: the church's lyrical, theological commentaries on Scripture, liturgy, faith, action, and hosts of other subjects which call the reader and singer to faith, life, and Christian practice."⁶ What happens, then, when Methodists begin singing songs written in other theological traditions? Does this shared repertoire

of songs threaten the integrity of United Methodist worship—or can it enrich it? Beginning with an introduction to how the CCLI Top 100 lists function and the United Methodist theological underpinnings for vetting, our paper traces the evolution of the vetting project across two historical phases, each reflecting a distinct approach. Phase One emphasizes the critical task of theological gatekeeping and fidelity to Wesleyan theology. Phase Two integrates the critical task with a constructive approach, reflecting a twenty-first-century United Methodist identity rooted in ecumenical hospitality. We argue that the process of Phase Two is itself a form of *sanctified vetting*, which better receives the ecumenical CCLI repertoire as a gift that can enrich the integrity of United Methodist worship in the United States.

CCLI Top 100: The Need for Evaluation

For many congregations, the CCLI Top 100 functions as an informal canon of contemporary worship music—a ready-made index of what is "working" in the wider church. The Worship Leader Research team writes that, for decades, the CCLI Top 100 list served as "something like a Billboard chart

.....

3. The United Methodist Church is governed by the General Conference, which is a quadrennial gathering of laity and clergy. Of note, the file name of the 2015 CCLI Vetting Project tool is titled "UMC Hymnal Proposal."

4. John Wesley, "Preface," in *A Collection of Hymns for the People Called Methodists* (London: Paramore, 1780).

5. John Wesley, "Preface."

6. S.T. Kimbrough Jr., "Hymns are Theology," *Theology Today* 42 (1985), 59.

for worship.”⁷ The list’s prominence makes it seem trustworthy: surely the songs sung by thousands of congregations must be the ones God is using most powerfully. However, the list, which is based on song usage data reported to CCLI by local churches, reflects the workings of the market and industry more than theological discernment. While the list provides some significant information about what churches *are* singing, it should not be seen as a vetted list of what churches *ought* to be singing.

The CCLI Top 100 Vetting Project aimed to accomplish what many assumed the Top 100 list already did: curate a list of songs that reflects not just popularity, but theological consensus and pastoral wisdom. Phase One of the project sought to address the first and most obvious limitation of the CCLI list: its lack of Wesleyan particularity. The list reflects a particular set of doctrinal and affective assumptions shaped by the Evangelical and Charismatic movements that produce most of its songs. For example, whereas Reformed theologies tend to focus on God’s sovereignty (and justice as a subsidiary) as the primary attribute of God, and Pentecostal theologies tend to focus on God’s power, Wesleyan theology focuses on love as the primary attribute of God.

Phase Two of the project developed from recognition of another limitation of the list: its cultural and demographic homogeneity. Most of the songs on the list reflect the

production and preferences of a particular racial and economic demographic, which makes up only one part of the global Christian community. For a denomination that understands itself as connectional and ecumenical, and committed to the inclusive love of God for all people, such a landscape poses significant challenges. Both phases of the denomination’s vetting project thus served as a way of reclaiming ecclesial agency in a landscape where digital metrics and industry forces masquerade as spiritual authority.

Vetting: Our Theological Task

A key emphasis of Wesleyan theology is the doctrine of sanctification—in Wesley’s terms, “Christian perfection.”⁸ Wesley taught that through the Spirit’s renewing work, believers could be perfected in love. The same is true of Methodist liturgical-theological identity: it is not a static form to be preserved, but an evolving tradition, continually shaped and reshaped by the Spirit’s presence in a changing world and a changing community. This vision resonates with the *Book of Discipline*’s description of the Methodist theological task as both critical and constructive:

It is critical in that we test various expressions of faith by asking: Are they true? Appropriate? Clear? Cogent? Credible? Are they based on love? Do they provide the Church

.....

7. “The CCLI Top 100 Changed and Nobody Is Talking about It,” Worship Leader Research, accessed October 13, 2025, <https://worshipleaderresearch.com/the-ccli-top-100-changed-and-nobody-is-talking-about-it>.

8. See John Wesley’s 1741 sermon, “Christian Perfection,” in *John Wesley’s Sermons: An Anthology*, eds. Albert C. Outler and Richard Heitzenrater (Abingdon Press, 1991), 69–84.

and its members with a witness that is faithful to the gospel as reflected in our living heritage and that is authentic and convincing in the light of human experience and the present state of human knowledge?

Our theological task is constructive in that every generation must appropriate creatively the wisdom of the past and seek God in their midst in order to think afresh about God, revelation, sin, redemption, worship, the church, freedom, justice, moral responsibility, and other significant theological concerns. Our summons is to understand and receive the gospel promises in our troubled and uncertain times.⁹

The two phases of the vetting project can be seen as an enactment of this theological task. Phase One was largely *critical*—testing songs for coherence with the theological convictions of the Wesleyan tradition, ensuring that what we sing corresponds to what we confess. Phase Two, however, sought to balance that critical discernment with the *constructive* work of renewal, in recognition of the particular gifts and challenges of our generation. As the Methodist theologian Paul W. Hoon once wrote, faithful worship requires “theological discrimination as well as sensitivity to cultures.”¹⁰ The UMC’s vetting project exemplifies this dual concern: a critical testing of theology in song, and an open, Spirit-led attentiveness to the contexts in which those songs are sung.

.....

9. “¶ 105, Our Theological Task,” *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church - 2020/2024* (The United Methodist Publishing House, 2024).

10. Paul Waitman Hoon, *The Integrity of Worship: Ecumenical and Pastoral Studies in Liturgical Theology* (Abingdon Press, 1971), 77.

Phase One: Evaluating for Theological Alignment (2015, 2016, 2017)

The CCLI Top 100 Vetting Project began as a group of ten scholars and practitioners gathering monthly online to evaluate the Top 100 list for theology, language, and singability. In what follows, we describe the vetting tool itself, narrate the communal process of vetting, and highlight examples that demonstrate how this first phase emphasized the critical task of theological alignment with the Wesleyan tradition above all else.

The Vetting Tool

The vetting tool was originally envisaged as an interactive database into which the vetting team would input comments that would then be made accessible to the public as a worship-planning tool (see Figure 1). The team evaluated songs for their theology, language, and singability, as well as multiple subcategories such as instrumentation and linguistic function. Not long into the process, I (Nelson) recall the team having some technological issues with the software, which resulted in abandoning this software-based approach and pivoting to a spreadsheet (Figure 1).

The first area of vetting evaluated the theological alignment of song lyrics with

Figure 1

The screenshot displays the 'Review Pre-Export' window of a software application. At the top, it shows 'Scores Staging' and 'Commendable Score: 4 (weighted)'. The main area is divided into several sections for rating different aspects of a song. On the left, a list of 'Rated Titles' includes '10,000 Reasons (Bless The Lord)', 'Above All', 'Alive', 'All Because Of Jesus', 'Always', 'Amazing Grace (My Chains Are G', 'At Your Name', 'Beautiful One', 'Because He Lives', 'Before The Throne Of God Above', 'Better Is One Day', 'Blessed Be Your Name', 'Break Every Chain', 'Breathe', 'Build Your Kingdom Here', 'Christ Is Enough', 'Christ Is Risen', 'Come Now Is The Time To Worsh', 'Cornerstone', 'Days Of Elijah', 'Desert Song', '116 Everlasting God', and '131 Forever'. The 'Everlasting God' entry is selected. The main evaluation area contains several sub-sections: 'Theology' (rated 4) with sub-ratings for Love (3), Time (4), Practical Divinity/Mean of Grace (4), Incarnation/Atonement (3), Holy Spirit/Sanctification (4), and Strong Wesleyan Perspective (4); 'Language' (rated 4) with sub-ratings for Gender (4), Culture & Stereotype (5), Images of God (4), Covenantal (7), Metaphorical (5), Relational (2), and You/Other (7); 'Singability' (rated 4) with sub-ratings for All Congregational (2), Hybrid (3), and Solo (1); 'Worship Movements' (rated 4) with sub-ratings for Entrance (8), Word/Response (5), Thanksgiving/Competition (5), and Sending (6); and 'Instrumentation' (rated 4) with sub-ratings for Piano/Keyboard (7), Piano/Organ (1), Acoustic/Guitar (6), and Band (8). A 'Comments' section at the bottom right contains the text: 'Not really sure what "strength will rise" means-- is this sort of saying if we worship we'll feel better? Verse is self-referential, pre-chorus and chorus evocative. More focus on strength/power'. At the bottom, there are buttons for 'Refresh Data', 'Export...', and 'Return to Main Menu'.

Wesleyan *theology*. To make this task approachable for team members, Taylor Burton-Edwards—in consultation with Lester Ruth and Lim Swee Hong, FHS—developed five core theological impulses of Methodist congregational song, drawn from the hymnody of Charles Wesley. The first, *love*, articulates God’s primary nature as love, which elicits humanity’s response of awe and praise. The second, *time*, reveals that God’s saving work in Christ evokes a response in the present moment, offering both pardon and release from the power of sin. The third, *means of grace*, demonstrates how God has given believers practical means by which they may be nourished in faith—including the sacraments, spiritual disciplines, and works of mercy. The fourth, *incarnation and atonement*, describes being made one with God not as a past transaction or limited to satisfaction or substitution, but as an ongoing reality in the mystery of Christ that

leads to ecstatic praise. The fifth, *the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit and sanctification*, shows how the Spirit leads believers to cooperate in their full salvation.

In light of these subcategories, evaluators were instructed to rate song lyrics from 1 (lowest) to 5 (highest) for their theological resonance. These ratings were only to be used if the song directly addressed one of these topics. If not, the song would simply not be evaluated for that subcategory. In addition to the numerical rankings, there was also a checkbox where team members could select if the song was “strongly Wesleyan” in its theology.

The next category of evaluation addressed harmony with denominational guidelines for *language* in United Methodist hymnody—specifically, inclusive language for humanity and expansive language for God. Team members were also invited to rate the extent to which a song’s imagery of

God aligned with “orthodox Christian theological affirmation.”¹¹ In addition, evaluators could comment on whether the song’s language employed helpful or harmful gendered expressions, or drew upon cultural or stereotypical references in constructive or problematic ways. Finally, team members checked boxes indicating what the song’s language was doing—whether it was evoking God, accompanying another liturgical action, or functioning in a self-referential way.

The final vetting category was *singability*, which involved an overall numerical score and subcategories related to performance practice, instrumentation, worship movements within the UMC’s basic pattern of worship, and text–tune fit. Comment boxes allowed team members to note whether a song was fully congregational, a hybrid of soloist and congregation, or intended for solo performance. Finally, team members entered keywords drawn from the index of the 1989 *United Methodist Hymnal* to aid in future cataloging and comparison.

The Vetting Process

Each team member received a mailed three-ring binder containing lead sheets and chord charts for every song. Over several months, the team analyzed the full CCLI Top 100 list and submitted individual spreadsheets to the team leader, who “averaged all scored items and produced a ‘commendable score’”

in which theological concerns were “double-weighted.”¹² A commendable score above 3.5 (on a five-point scale) was the basic threshold for determining which songs to add to specific lists: a green list, a yellow list, or a red list.

After this preliminarily sorting, the team reviewed the selections together. Sometimes, songs initially rated favorably—those on the green or yellow lists—were later deemed unsuitable through communal discernment. More often, however, songs that had scored lower were conditionally recommended with caution. The process culminated in three published lists:

The Green List includes those that generally scored 3.5 or higher on a five point scale across our criteria and that we have agreed present few if any obstacles, other than key register in some cases, for our congregations to sing with confidence. The Yellow List includes songs that have one or more significant issues we believe may require some conversation between musicians and pastors about whether or how to include them in worship, but are generally sound. The italicized items at the bottom of this list may require additional attention, either because they include language that could be understood as racist, or overuse exclusively male images of God, or could be interpreted as theologically problematic. We still commend them, but we especially encourage

.....

11. “The CCLI 2015 Top 100 Vetting Project: The Vetting Tool,” Discipleship Ministries, accessed October 10, 2025, https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/gbod-assets/generic/CCLI-Vetting-Project_TheVettingTool.pdf.

12. “The CCLI 2015 Top 100 Vetting Project: The Vetting Tool.”

further conversation to occur around how these might be performed.¹³

As evidenced by the double-weighting and remarks above, theology was the primary lens through which songs were evaluated. Importantly, the team decided not to publish a “red list.” This decision reflected an understanding that these songs were not inherently bad, but simply out of harmony with the Wesleyan theological tradition. Rather than publicizing negative commentary, the committee chose to omit those results entirely.

Examples of Vetting for Theological Alignment

Of the thirty-eight songs placed on the “yellow list” in Phase One, twenty-six were flagged for issues with theology. One example is the 2013 song “Man of Sorrows” by Hillsong Worship, a song about Christ as the suffering savior written in the style of a strophic hymn for the verses, plus a chorus and bridge. The team remarked that the song’s account of Christ’s atoning work on the cross did not fully capture the Wesleyan way of salvation insofar as the song’s bridge portrayed justification as if it were the end-point of salvation. The team commented,

“In our theology, sin still has a strong hold on us that it takes sanctifying grace to continue to unloose,” resulting in the recommendation that the bridge be omitted.¹⁴

In a similar vein, the team yellow-listed “Victory in Jesus,” which regularly appears on the CCLI Top 100 and is included as hymn #370 in *The United Methodist Hymnal*. The theological concern was eschatological: that the song’s imagery orients believers toward “going up there” rather than anticipating the trajectory of God’s redeeming work in the new creation.¹⁵

Despite its inclusion in published United Methodist resources, one song that appeared on the unpublished “red list” was the modern hymn “In Christ Alone.”¹⁶ Surprisingly, the issue was not the oft-debated topic of satisfaction atonement theory in the line “‘til on that cross as Jesus died / the wrath of God was satisfied.” Rather, the team withheld recommendation because of the line “Jesus commands my destiny.” This was viewed as predestinarian in tenor and an example of “Trinitarian collapse,” since predestination is biblically and theo-historically more aligned with God the First Person than with the Son. For “In Christ Alone,” the theological minutiae mattered more

.....

13. “CCLI 2015–2017 Top 100 Songs Vetted for United Methodist Congregations,” Discipleship Ministries, accessed October 10, 2025, https://gbod-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/legacy/kintera-files/worship-music/2015-2016_CCLI-Top-100-Commended-List_January2017.pdf.

14. “CCLI 2015–2017 Top 100 Songs.”

15. “CCLI 2015–2017 Top 100 Songs.”

16. Michael Hawn, FHS, notes the inconsistency in his historical overview of the hymn, namely how it was selected for inclusion in The United Methodist Church’s 2011 hymnal supplement *Worship & Song* while also being red listed for the CCLI Top 100 Vetting Project. See C. Michael Hawn, “History of Hymns: In Christ Alone My Hope Is Found,” Discipleship Ministries, October 23, 2019, <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/articles/history-of-hymns-in-christ-alone-my-hope-is-found>.

than the hymn's broader theological import and congregational value.

Twenty-one of the thirty-eight yellow-listed songs were also flagged due to concerns about language. Most of the critiques about language carried a theological tone, especially regarding images of God. Consider the team's remarks from the number-one song in 2016, "Good, Good Father" by Pat Barrett. While the consistent address of God as "Father" was considered "commendable," the team expressed concern that the image had become "thoroughly sentimentalized and ... disconnected from biblical usage of the term."¹⁷ Similarly, several songs identified as examples of "Trinitarian collapse" demonstrate that even within the language category, theological scrutiny remained central.

Phase One ultimately functioned as an exercise in theological gatekeeping: measuring songs as self-contained texts against Wesleyan standards. Methodist identity operated like a critical filter—allowing songs that aligned with these standards to pass through and catching those that did not. Even so, the committee aimed to be generous in vetting, affirming songs United Methodists "can sing...and that can be good for us to sing," even if not a perfect fit.¹⁸ By 2017, roughly one-third of songs were fully recommended, one-third cautiously recommended, and one-third not commended. In view of this, it is hard not to see yellow-list songs as a dilution of Methodist theological richness—why

sing something that merely passes when others align more clearly with our tradition? If Phase One clarified how United Methodists should set theological boundaries, Phase Two would begin to imagine those boundaries as far more porous.

Phase Two: Curating an Expanded Canon

Relaunched in 2021 as the "CCLI Top 100 + Beyond Project," Phase Two retained the critical goal of evaluating songs for alignment with Wesleyan theology, language guidelines, and singability, but also aimed to go further—"beyond" the CCLI list itself. Practically, this meant supplementing the list with songs by (a) Black, Latinx, and Asian artists, (b) independent artists and small record labels, (c) the "global song" genre, (d) women songwriters, and (e) songs outside the theological scope of evangelicalism. The most visible outcome of this was the inclusion of artists not previously featured on CCLI lists, such as The Porter's Gate (with underrepresented themes like lament and justice), the multiethnic Ethnos Project Collective, Brazilian artist Gabriela Rocha, gospel artists Melvin Crispell III and Jazmine Lynn Jones, and the United Methodist group COR Worship Collective.

This pivot was grounded in two historical realities. The first was The United

17. "CCLI 2015–2017 Top 100 Songs."

18. "CCLI 2015–2016 Top 100 Songs for United Methodist Congregations" Discipleship Ministries, February 2, 2016, <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/ccli-2015-2016-top-100-songs-for-united-methodist-congregations>.

Methodist Church's anti-racism initiative, "a multilevel effort to dismantle racism and promote collective action to work toward racial justice," inaugurated by the Council of Bishops on Juneteenth (June 19), 2020.¹⁹ Phase Two paralleled this denominational commitment by seeking to elevate under-represented voices in congregational song. The second historical context followed the 2019 General Conference, which narrowly reaffirmed the UMC's traditionalist stance on human sexuality. Despite this outcome, many U.S.-based United Methodists in fact held more moderate or progressive views. Phase Two of this resource—like others produced at the time—was part of an effort to build bridges between conservative and progressive theological camps.

The constructive distinctives of Phase Two are reflected in several ways: a reconstituted and more diverse vetting team of academics and practitioners; a simplified vetting process; expanded theological categories; the abandonment of color-coded evaluative lists; revised guidelines for performance practice that emphasized contextual applications; and an approach that viewed songs within the liturgy rather than as isolated texts.

Phase Two Distinctives: People, Processes, and Methods

The Phase Two vetting team aimed to reflect the "big tent" vision of The United Methodist Church, geographically, racially,

and theologically. The original Phase One team represented a helpful mix of laity and clergy and was theologically diverse, yet it remained predominantly white, academically oriented, and concentrated in the southeastern United States. Phase Two was significantly more racially diverse (with white members in the minority), more practitioner-oriented, and geographically distributed across more UMC jurisdictions. It was not as theologically diverse as Phase One, with most members holding moderate to progressive theological views. Because of the practitioner-oriented nature of the team—even among those with scholarly credentials—team members also functioned as researchers who helped populate the list of songs "beyond" the CCLI Top 100 for the vetting team's review. In terms of process, each team member was invited to submit five to ten songs that reflected the intended diversities of Phase Two, particularly songs that were written within the previous five to ten years.

All songs, whether from the CCLI Top 100 or beyond, underwent the same vetting process, albeit in a more streamlined format. The team retained the spreadsheet method but made subtle adjustments to the primary categories of evaluation: theology, language, and performance practice (formerly "singability"). For theology, reviewers selected "yes" or "no" to indicate whether a song reflected a given theological category, then used a comment box to elaborate. For language, team

.....

19. "Bishops Launch Dismantling Racism," The United Methodist Church, June 19, 2020, <https://www.umc.org/en/content/bishops-juneteenth-dismantling-racism-announcement>.

members answered “yes” or “no” to whether the lyrics aligned with the UMC’s inclusive and expansive language practices, and then noted the song’s primary perspective—personal (God/I), corporate (God/we), or both (God/I/we)—with space for additional remarks. Finally, under performance practice, team members provided narrative suggestions for how the song might be performed in worship, including notes on arrangement, leadership, or congregational participation. The final column of the spreadsheet offered an overall numerical score, from 1 to 5, allowing the team leader to preliminarily sort songs prior to the monthly team meetings, where more detailed conversation and discernment took place.

A small but intentional theological adjustment in Phase Two was the expansion of the “means of grace” category to include song lyrics that address justice. In Methodist theology, the means of grace are typically subdivided between works of piety and works of mercy. The latter encompass individual acts such as visiting the sick, feeding the hungry, and giving generously, as well as communal practices such as seeking justice, ending oppression, and attending to the systemic needs of the poor.²⁰ Phase Two sought to make explicit the justice-infused nature of the means of grace, especially since it is

thematically scarce in the contemporary worship music repertoire.

Another constructive adjustment that Phase Two introduced was in the publication of the resource itself. Rather than releasing a simple list with critical commentary, the team created a worship-planning

We argue that the process of Phase Two is itself a form of sanctified vetting.

resource that narratively highlighted the strengths and opportunities of each song.²¹ To that end, the previous “green light” and “yellow light” distinctions were eliminated. All songs were instead presented as “recommended,” each accompanied by contextual framing to help worship leaders discern how best to use them (see Figure 2). Songs that might once have been flagged on the yellow list were now commended with pastoral cautions and practical suggestions so that, with the right shepherding, they could more faithfully serve a local church. Moreover, to de-center the “popular” songs and elevate those reflecting broader diversities, the entire list was published alphabetically, without indicating whether or not a song appeared on the CCLI Top 100 (Figure 2).

Some of this contextual framing took the form of performance practice guidelines on

.....

20. “The Wesleyan Means of Grace,” United Methodist Communications, accessed October 13, 2025, <https://www.umc.org/en/content/the-wesleyan-means-of-grace>.

21. Nelson Cowan and Diana Sanchez-Bushong, “2024 Round of Vetting for CCLI Top 100 + Beyond Project for United Methodist Worship Leaders,” Discipleship Ministries, June 24, 2024, <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/articles/2024-round-of-vetting-for-ccli-top-100-beyond-project-for-united-methodist-worship-leaders>.

Figure 2

Declaring Glory – *Porter's Gate*

Key Wesleyan Theological Emphases: Love
Song Perspective: Personal and Corporate

Written from the perspective of the earth, “Declaring Glory” speaks of the impulse of all creation to praise its Creator. It could be a congregational song or a special music piece. The rhythm of the verses could be difficult for congregational singing, but the chorus and concluding bridge are easy to follow. Sing this during the Season of Creation (an ecumenical observance in September), for Earth Day, or any time you want to highlight creation’s role in God’s redemptive plans.

ADDITIONAL ARRANGEMENTS: Congregational Version – Wood Street Worship

LICENSING COVERAGE: CCLI

how a song might be sung, led, or arranged to align more faithfully with Wesleyan theology and worship practice. These guidelines included YouTube links to specific musical arrangements of a song, highlighting bilingual versions of a song when available, and intentional notes about whether and how a song could be adapted for a smaller musical team.

Contextual framing also took place with a shift from evaluating songs as individual, self-contained units to evaluating a song’s ability to function within the larger worship service. Analyzing songs as discrete theological units has its place, but it risks obscuring the reality that songs do not exist in isolation in a worship service but are woven into a liturgical sequence framed by prayer and proclamation, Word and sacrament. Phase Two’s evaluative framework thus shifted

from a sole analysis of the textual theology of songs to an analysis of liturgical theology more broadly: from asking “what does this song say?” to “what does this song do, and in what context?”²²

Songs that might once have been flagged were now recommended with pastoral cautions and suggestions for their use and adaptation. One example is the song “God is Great” by John Lakin, recorded by Ricky Dillard & New G. Under the Phase One vetting criteria, the song might merely have been marked as yellow for its “limited naming and imagery for God” and dismissed. Under Phase Two, however, this cautionary note was accompanied with the following suggestion: “surround with liturgical elements—songs, prayers, visuals—that offer more expansive imagery.”

.....

22. As examples, see Nelson Cowan’s article, “Supplement, Supplement, Supplement” and Troi Aragon-Buchanan’s article “Making Your Song Choices Contextual” in the resource “CCLI Top 100 + Beyond: A Toolbox for Worship Leaders,” Discipleship Ministries, March 3, 2021, <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/articles/ccli-top-100-beyond-project>.

These guidelines embody the conviction that worship is not only about what we sing, but *how* we sing—and that right performance, as much as right belief, participates in our sanctification. John Wesley himself recognized the importance of singing well. His directions for congregational singing, printed inside the UMC hymnal, include: “Sing lustily and with a good courage. Beware of singing as if you were half dead, or half asleep”; “Above all sing spiritually.”²³ These directions articulate a theology of musical performance that links the physical act of singing with the singer’s spiritual disposition. Singing is a means of grace precisely because it engages the whole person: intellect, body, and affect.

Conclusion: “Sanctified Vetting”

What emerged through the two phases of the vetting process can be described as sanctified vetting—a distinctly Wesleyan form of discernment that understands evaluation itself as a means of grace. Rather than a gate-keeping exercise aimed at excluding errant songs, sanctified vetting seeks the continued edification and sanctification of the church through charitable critique, communal dialogue, and hope in the Spirit’s ongoing work of perfecting love. This is deeply rooted in

the history of Methodism and is part and parcel of United Methodist ecclesial identity today.

Methodists have always been a singing people, so much so that Methodist historian Karen Westerfield Tucker, FHS, observed that “public worship, as well as private, family, and social worship would not have been considered Methodist unless accompanied with song. What prayer books were for some Christians, the hymn books were for generations of Methodists.”²⁴ Reflecting on the legacy of Methodism, Geoffrey Wainwright wrote, “The spirit of Methodism is still most truly expressed in the best of the Wesleyan hymns which live on.”²⁵ Seen in this historical light, sanctified vetting continues the work of the Methodist hymn tradition. Just as Wesley and the early Methodists carefully judged which texts and tunes were suitable for forming a holy people, today’s evaluators undertake a similar work of theological and cultural discernment.

Sanctified vetting rests on a distinctly Wesleyan understanding of grace—what Randy Maddox has called “responsible grace.”²⁶ For Wesley, divine grace is not merely a kind of passive pardon, but rather divine empowerment that invites human participation. A Wesleyan understanding of grace holds that believers have a responsibility to take an active role in their ongoing sanctification.

.....

23. John Wesley, “Directions for Singing” (1761), published in *United Methodist Hymnal* (United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), vii.

24. Karen Westerfield Tucker, *American Methodist Worship* (Oxford University Press, 2001), 156.

25. Geoffrey Wainwright, *Doxology: The Praise of God in Worship, Doctrine, and Life* (Oxford University Press, 1980), 201.

26. Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology* (Kingswood Books, 1994).

In this sense, the Spirit-led discernment of the church's song becomes one of the means through which believers cooperate with divine grace, becoming partakers in the life divine. The vetting team has tried to model a way of approaching the discernment process that all worship leaders can participate in. Crucially, it sees leaders' intimate knowledge of their particular contexts as a gift in discerning not only *what* should be sung, but *how* songs might be sung in ways that build up the body of Christ.

The shift from critical to constructive vetting also reflects a Wesleyan ecclesiology that understands holiness as participation in, not withdrawal from, the world. As Elaine A. Heath puts it, holiness is not "a matter of 'purifying' oneself by removing oneself from the muck and mire of actual life. On the contrary, the holy life is one that is fully engaged in the world in the name and power of Jesus Christ."²⁷ The church's holiness emerges from faithful engagement within the world. Sanctified vetting embodies a radical trust in the Spirit's steady presence within the messy realities of cultural production, industrial and market forces, and even our attempts at ecumenism, enabling the church to engage a diverse worship repertoire as sanctified participants—people who allow the Spirit to help them discern how diverse songs can be received as gifts and woven into Methodist

worship, not to dilute its identity, but to form it more fully in love. This "sanctified vetting" process offers a model for how The United Methodist Church might approach theological reflection more broadly. In a time when denominational identity can feel contested or fragile, the vetting project embodies a living Methodist theology—critical in its fidelity to doctrine, constructive in its engagement with culture, and hopeful in its trust in God's grace.

Rev. Nelson Cowan, PhD, is a liturgical theologian, worship leader, and ordained elder in The United Methodist Church. He serves as Director of the Center for Worship and the Arts at Samford University, leading initiatives at the intersection of worship, theology, the arts, and young people.



Deborah Ann Wong, ThD, is a worship leader and scholar committed to serving the Church as a theologian for worship leaders and a worship leader for theologians. She holds an MDiv and a ThD in Liturgical Studies from Duke University Divinity School, where her work focused on the intersection between worship theology, worship practice, and spiritual formation, with an emphasis on contemporary and charismatic expressions of praise and worship. She currently serves as the worship leader at Oxford United Methodist Church in Oxford, NC.



.....

27. Elaine A. Heath, *The Mystic Way of Evangelism: A Contemplative Vision for Christian Outreach* (Baker Academic, 2008), 63.

Can Reformed Theologies and CCLI Top Songs Harmonize?

JEREMY PERIGO AND ADAM A. PEREZ

What does it mean to be Reformed and to evaluate an industrialized set of songs from that positionality? In 2023, at the encouragement of Center for Congregational Song director, Brian Hehn, a group of eight worship leaders, pastors, and theologians gathered digitally to build on the “CCLI Vetting Project” modeled by the United Methodist Church. The report that followed from our work named the challenge of the project well:

We quickly realized the diversity in worship practices and styles in our settings was going to pose unique challenges. Every song has strengths and opportunities, and we greatly respect the prayerful and Spirit-led decisions made across our tradition each week as worship planners get to work.¹

What this description masks is the more fundamental task of identifying what, *exactly*, the eight of us had in mind about the core features of the Reformed tradition of worship and theology when considering the CCLI top songs. Yet, four key

.....

1. Katie Ritsema-Roelofs, Jeremy Perigo, Adam Perez, et al., “CCLI Vetting Project: A Reformed Voice” Christian Reformed Church: The Network, January 17, 2024, <https://network.crcna.org/topic/worship/music/ccli-vetting-project-reformed-voice>.

themes emerged as primary evaluative lenses related to the formative aspect of worship songs: the biblical and theological, the individualistic versus the corporate, voicing the reality of human suffering, and congregational singability. We evaluated each song on the most recent top 100 list available at that time. Yet, these themes don't immedi-

Though many Reformed congregations utilize the more Charismatic-influenced CCLI songs, their distinct theologies and practices can be dissonant. Can Reformed theologies and CCLI top songs harmonize?

ately clarify how the traditions of Reformed worship might be emerging in the CCLI top songs as a *corpus* or how Christians who identify as "Reformed" today are crafting a *repertory* in their local communities in idiosyncratic ways.

From the unaccompanied singing of the Psalms of Reformed Presbyterians to the boisterous praise of Dutch-Reformed university students belting out a Bethel song in a darkened, haze-filled auditorium, the repertoires of Reformed communities across the globe are nuanced.² While the liturgical distinctives that characterize contemporary

Neo-Reformed and Neo-Calvinist movements—along with their related subgroups—often revolve around particular theologians and pastors such as Herman Bavinck, Tim Keller, John Piper, and Mark Driscoll, the practice of congregational singing remains deeply rooted in theological themes that are closely related and vital to claims of a

Reformed identity. Though many Reformed congregations utilize the more Charismatic-influenced CCLI songs, their distinct theologies and practices can be dissonant. Can Reformed theologies and CCLI top songs harmonize?

In 2024, we joined a team of other Reformed worship leaders, pastors, and theologians who collaborated to

support Reformed churches in vetting the musical, theological, and liturgical strengths and weaknesses of the most popular contemporary worship songs. Using the most current Top 100 CCLI USA list of the time, the group analyzed each song and published "CCLI Vetting Project: A Reformed Voice" to aid local congregations in their song selection processes.³ Though each song received individual analysis, in reflecting on a Reformed response to the entire repertoire, several prominent themes emerged, including biblical and theological concerns, individualistic language, a minimization of

.....

2. Richard Gambel, "Singing Psalms Only: The Beautiful Theology of Singing in Worship," RP Witness, accessed October 14, 2025, <https://rpwitness.org/article/singing-psalms-only#:~:text=Reformed%20Presbyterians%20need%20to%20be,God%E2%80%99s%20specific%20New%20Testament%20command.>

3. Ritsema-Roelofs, Perigo, Perez, et al.

human suffering, and melodies that are congregationally unsingable or difficult.

In our continued engagement with the question, several songs emerged from songwriters and publishers who self-identify as Reformed. Distinct from the “Big Four” (Bethel, Elevation, Hillsong, and Passion), who have dominated the CCLI list for the past decade, several Reformed-oriented songs with links to Keith and Kristyn Getty and their Sing! Conference have emerged.

This study will analyze the musical and theological distinctions of seven

Reformed-oriented songs within the larger repertoire of contemporary praise and worship music (CPWM) (see Table 1). In doing so, we explore the ways that potential users of these songs might harmonize between mainstream CPWM repertoire and the Reformed sources, contexts, and theologies that sometimes reject it. Indeed, the source of a song (its writer, performer, or where it was encountered) conveys something to listeners about its theological content and potentially harmonious use in a Reformed context.

Table 1

Song Title	CCLI Song #	Writers	© Year	Publishers / Copyright Holders
Before the Throne	2306412	Charitie Lees Bancroft, Vikki Cook	1997	Sovereign Grace Worship
Christ Our Hope in Life and Death	7147502	Jordan Kauflin, Keith Getty, Matt Boswell, Matt Papa, Matthew Merker	2020	Getty Music Hymns and Songs; Getty Music Publishing; Jordan Kauflin Music; Love Your Enemies Publishing; Matthew Merker Music; Messenger Hymns
He Will Hold Me Fast	7016161	Ada Ruth Habershon, Matthew Merker	2013	Getty Music Publishing; Matthew Merker Music
His Mercy Is More	7065053	Matt Boswell, Matt Papa	2016	Getty Music Hymns and Songs; Getty Music Publishing; Love Your Enemies Publishing; Messenger Hymns
How Deep the Father's Love	1558110	Stuart Townend	1995	Thankyou Music Ltd
In Christ Alone	3350395	Keith Getty, Stuart Townend	2001	Thankyou Music Ltd
Is He Worthy (?)	7108951	Andrew Peterson, Ben Shive	2018	Capitol CMG Genesis; Junkbox Music; Vamos Publishing; Jakedog Music

The Getty Platform

Perhaps, the most logical way in which various Reformed traditions could harmonize with the Contemporary Praise and Worship tradition is around the use of the Psalms. The father of the Reformed tradition, John Calvin, restricted congregational singing in the community at Geneva to monophonic settings of the Psalms. This legacy has been honored in one way or another in many reformed communities up through the present.⁴ Likewise, quotations from and paraphrases of the Psalms are the backbone of the explosive growth of newly written songs in the Pentecostal-charismatic from the 1940s through the 1990s and beyond. While we have not conducted an analysis of recent song texts and their Biblical sources, anecdotal evidence suggests that the Psalms are not the point of contact between these traditions in the present moment.

Instead of the Psalms, the point of contact between the Reformed tradition more broadly and the worship music industry in its present forms seems to be embodied in the persons of Keith and Kristyn Getty, and also in the songwriting network with which they associate (by co-writing and by hosting at their annual Sing! conference). We might

simply call this network of folks with whom they share the stage the *Getty platform*. It's our hunch that these songs have some legible connection for singers and congregations to the Reformed theologies and communities that have been associated with the Gettys and their conference.

This connection has been realized in at least one of three ways: first, because the song has been co-written by the Gettys; second, because the Gettys have featured these songs or writers at their annual Sing! conference; or, third, because the Gettys have covered the song and helped propel it to fame. In this way, the Gettys function in a similar way to the "Big Four" church worship bands (Elevation, Bethel, Hillsong, and Passion) who have shaped the CCLI top 25 by performing or platforming mainstream contemporary worship songs in the 2010s.⁵

There also seems to be another feature distinct to this network of "Reformed" songs: they may be the largest subset of songs across the CCLI list that bears some distinctive and self-conscious theological or ecclesial character. While the presence of the Gettys within the CPW industry is well-known—their songs appear on CCLI (with 38 songs on the top 500 in 2024⁶), they were once distributed by long-time industry staple Integrity Music, and their catalog is currently

.....

4. Martin Tel, "Reformed Liturgy," in *Historical Foundations of Worship: Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant Perspectives*, ed. Mark A. Lamport and Melanie C. Ross (Baker Academic, 2022).

5. Worship Leader Research Team, "(Almost) 100% of the Top 25 Worship Songs Are Associated with Just a Handful of Megachurches," Worship Leader Research, April 11, 2023, <https://worshipleaderresearch.com/100-of-the-top-25-worship-songs-are-associated-with-just-a-handful-of-megachurches/>.

6. Kelsey Kramer McGinnis, "The Gettys' Modern Hymn Movement Has Theological Pull," Christianity Today, October 2, 2024, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/2024/10/keith-kristyn-getty-sing-conference-nashville-modern-hymns-theology-worship/>.

administered by Capitol CMG Publishing—few scholars have addressed their relationship to the broader industry with academic rigor. Nathan Burgraff’s music theoretical corpus study of contemporary worship acknowledges two distinct sub-repertoires within CCLI: Getty songs and Sovereign Grace songs. Burgraff does not, however, theorize at length the relationship between these groups or their relationships to the mainstream of songs on CCLI. Instead, he, like us, acknowledges that these Reformed sources have intentionally positioned themselves in contrast to the mainstream CPW tradition and are thus worthy of attention. In his music theoretical analysis, he notes how their harmonic and melodic choices reflect different musical styles and relationships to mainstream CPW conventions.⁷ In addition to his analysis of these more concrete musical qualities, we might add here that the Gettys often write in metered poetic forms akin to the legacy of hymn-writing traditions of which they see themselves as a modern incarnation and vanguard. Perhaps this poetic feature, too, is an attractive quality for Reformed traditions who for centuries were restricted to (or highly encouraged toward) the use of metered Psalms and other poetry.

Methodology of Song Analysis

As two scholars with formation in the Reformed tradition and who are engaged in the contemporary worship space as practitioners and leaders, we’ve seen how many of these songs have been received in churches, universities, and at conferences that self-profess a Reformed identity. Our method is inductive: there isn’t a master list of “Reformed” songs, nor are the Gettys defining Reformed theology on their own. Instead, Keith and Kristyn Getty have successfully mobilized their popular reception into a brand name that represents a cultural reaction to something about the current state of the most popular worship musics. In a 2019 interview in the *Christian Post*, the Gettys described their posture toward contemporary worship music. Keith remarked on the state of current songwriting and lamented that, in his view, modern church songwriters don’t know their Bible well enough:

I believe that the modern worship movement is a movement for cultural relevance. It’s a de-Christianizing of God’s people. It’s utterly dangerous. I have no quibbles saying, “Enough is enough.” This can’t happen to build an authentic generation.⁸

.....

7. Nathan Burgraff, “Silencing the Congregation: The Impact of Musical and Cultural Changes on Congregational Singing in American Evangelical Churches,” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 66, no. 1 (2023), 97–117.

8. Leah MarieAnn Klett, “Keith Getty: Modern Worship Mov’t Is ‘Utterly Dangerous,’ Causing ‘De-Christianizing of God’s People,’” *The Christian Post*, November 9, 2019, <https://www.christianpost.com/news/keith-getty-modern-worship-movement-is-utterly-dangerous-causing-de-christianizing-of-gods-people.html>.

In the article, Keith Getty goes on to suggest that his goal is, instead, to orient folks to the “great hymns of the [Christian] faith” that have stood the test of time and that talk about the primary themes of heaven, hell, and eternity. Their songs also invoke archaic language reminiscent of texts from a time gone by. More recently, Keith Getty, in discussing the new *Sing! Hymnal* project released by their organization in 2025, offers perhaps his most blatant critique of CPW saying, “There is a terrible theology of what worship and singing now is in the church that is far closer linked to sales and marketing and therapy than it is to holy worship.”⁹

In the remainder of this essay, we discuss how Reformed theology may serve as a resource for Getty network worship songs and how some mainstream contemporary worship songs might be received in Reformed churches. Instead of offering an ethnographic or data-based approach (such data is not available), we allow our personal experiences as worship leaders and planners in Reformed contexts—as well as our formal theological training—to shape our attention to these themes. We highlight some larger theological themes as well as specific song texts and note where harmony and dissonance might be occurring between Reformed theology and mainstream Pentecostal-charismatic and Evangelical theologies.

Harmonizing across Time through Style

While novelty may be celebrated within the Contemporary Praise and Worship Movement, as new and even spontaneous songs are encouraged, a Reformed ecclesiological emphasis on the visible and invisible covenant community encompasses a shared tradition that spans across time.

It seems that songs that have emerged from noticeably “Reformed” sources on the top CCLI list share two general features that may appeal to a sense of that “tradition.” The first feature is longer, more text-heavy verses that invoke an imagined, monolithic “hymn tradition” in their progression and form—the structure of “In Christ Alone” is perhaps emblematic here. The second feature is the use of antiquated language in songs that seem to appeal to a real or imagined past that predates—or even actively resists—the contemporary worship music era.

While trying to present something new—a prerequisite to industry participation—the song lyrics and musical structures index an imagined past of stability and orthodoxy.¹⁰ Other songs in the top CCLI list may even be insufficient for some Reformed communities because they don’t resonate with the

9. The Gospel Coalition, “Sing with Getty and Other Greats in This New Hymnal,” Gospelbound (podcast), September 9, 2025, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/podcasts/gospelbound/sing-with-getty-and-other-greats-in-this-new-hymnal/>.

10. Reflecting on utilizing antiquated language in worship songs in their book on the stewardship of language in worship, Reformed theologians Ron and Debra Rienstra write, “We can honor the memorial function of worship language by connecting our lives to the stories of ordinary saints who have gone before us.” Debra Rienstra and Ron Rienstra, *Worship Words: Discipling Language for Faith Ministry* (Baker Academic, 2009), 37.

lyrical theology of memorialist functions (theologically and culturally).

Consider, for example, lyrics describing God as Father, in two popular songs. Pat Barrett and Housefires write, “You’re a good, good Father; it’s who You are” and “I’m loved by You; it’s who I am,” while Stuart Townend writes, “How deep the Father’s love for us / How vast beyond all measure / That He should give His only Son / To make a wretch His treasure.”¹¹ Here Townend’s “How Deep the Father’s Love” and Barrett’s “Good, Good Father” broadly share a similar view of God the Father as a loving, self-giving God, who reveals and acts. Though similar in relational dynamics, one of the major distinctions is in the traditional language of Townend’s song. Though written in the mid 1990s, the seemingly antiquated language of “vast” and “wretch” in Townend’s song evokes a memorial dimension linking this relatively recent composition with the worship songs of previous generations.

In a recent interview, when asked about a hymn’s timeless appeal compared to contemporary worship music on the radio, Keith Getty responded that his vision for his songs is “being able to sing a song that you can live with for 50 years.”¹² After discussing the intergenerational appreciation and linguistic appeal of “Be Thou My Vision,” he continues, “the modern worship music ... at a general level is trying to write songs that sound relevant to the music of the moment,

which means by logical deduction ... in 10 years time ... will not sound logical.” Here Getty is arguing for (and modeling in his arrangements) a shared linguistic tradition for Christian hymnody (using language which is, of course, rooted in its own particular time and place, but is not universal to English-language speakers).

Reformed responses to CCLI not only point back to the shared tradition lyrically but also musically. The harmonic structure of the most popular Reformed-oriented CCLI songs typically consists of I, ii, IV, V, and vi chords, and are often in AAB forms with three or four verses and a refrain, typically labeled as a chorus. These songs may sound like traditional hymns, but can easily be adapted for acoustic guitar-led worship services. In the seven songs that appear on our list, none of them have an emotive bridge, and only “Is He Worthy?” had musical tags that intuitively lend themselves to spontaneous singing or improvised interludes. In fact, Upper Room and Maverick City Music, both known for their extended spontaneous worship services, have covered versions of this Andrew Peterson song. Musically, all of these songs have limited syncopation with interval movement and phrasing resonant with Western hymnody. Archaic and theologically-rich worship words with singable tunes reflecting traditional Western hymnody are not simply a genre preference but an ecclesiological community connection across space and time.

.....

11. Pat Barrett and Anthony Brown, “Good Good Father” (Capital CMG Paragon, et al., 2014).

12. Gospel Coalition, “Sing with Getty.”

Harmonizing Lyrical Theologies: Distinct but Palatable

In our analysis, much of the dissonance stems from the lyrical theology embedded in top CCLI songs, particularly those related to theological anthropology, soteriology, suffering, and eschatology.

The Reformed-oriented CCLI songs all emphasize human depravity and salvation by grace alone through Christ alone. In these songs, the worshippers declare “my faith will fail” and “my love will fail” but “He will hold me fast,” or “my mocking voice / Calls out among the scoffers” but “His dying breath has brought me life.” In other songs, the depravity and grace-centered soteriology is even more straightforward: “Our sins they are many / His mercy is more” and “Yet not I but through Christ.” A closely related theological theme, the doctrine of election is downplayed in these Reformed-oriented CCLI songs. Though an essential distinction in Reformed theology, its minimization may be due to the intense historical debates between Calvinists and Arminians and a desire for these songs to be utilized beyond Reformed congregations. Election can be implied in “In Christ Alone:” “No power of hell, no scheme of man / Can ever pluck me from His hand” but it can also be read as an

appeal to a more generic sense of assurance and faith.

With these theological emphases in mind, lyrics in other CCLI songs such as “I run to the Father / I fall into grace / I’m done hiding” in “Run to the Father”¹³ can lead to dissonance if Reformed worship leaders interpret the lyrics as human agency solving the problem of sin. Similarly, although the lyric “Hell lost another one” in “I Thank God”¹⁴ could be highlighting a *Christus Victor* atonement theology, it could also be implying that “the doctrine of election is being denied” through a more anthropocentric soteriology that is absent in Reformed theology.¹⁵ This testimonial-style bridge does celebrate Christ’s cosmic victory, but some Reformed voices may feel that the doctrine of predestination is being questioned or denied, placing more emphasis on the individual’s work above God’s work in salvation. To the contrary, the most popular Reformed-oriented CCLI songs in this study present salvation as Christ-mediated and grace-centered.

More specifically and most commonly, these Reformed-oriented songs highlight a soteriological understanding of atonement as debt-payment satisfaction or Penal Substitutionary Atonement. Christ is the “Lamb who dies to ransom the slave” (“Is He Worthy?”) and whose “blood was the payment / His life was the cost” (“His Mercy is More”) and “For God the just is satisfied /

.....

13. Cody Carnes, Matt Maher, and Ran Jackson, “Run to the Father” (Capitol CMG Paragon; Writer’s Roof Publishing; Be Essential Songs; I Am A Pilgrim Songs; Songs From Richmond Park; 2019).

14. Aaron Moses, Chuck Butler, Dante Bowe, Enrique Holmes, Jesse Cline, Maryanne J. George, “I Thank God” (Bethel Worship Publishing; Heritage Worship Music Publishing; Maverick City Publishing; Aaron Moses Chiriboga Music; Be Essential Songs; Holmeboy Music Group; Jesse Cline Publishing Designee; Jord A Lil Music; MJ George Music; 2021).

15. This particular reaction emerged directly from the Reformed Voice project. See Ritsema-Roelofs, Perigo, Perez, et al.

To look on Him and pardon me” (“Before the Throne of God Above”).

Also emerging from these soteriological themes is a dialogical view of worship that begins with God-initiated activity and then a human response. For example, in “Before the Throne of God Above,” the verses initially speak of Christ’s salvific work and the related personal implications. The lyrics then call the worshiper to respond in verse four in doxological terms, such as to “bow,” “marvel,” and “glory” in Christ’s activity. Similarly, “In Christ Alone” unpacks themes of Christ’s incarnation, death, resurrection, and future return, while the worshippers’ response is to “stand” and “live” in this reality. Here, worship is seen as initiated first in God’s own activity and revelation. Reformed traditions, in particular, highlight God’s role in inspiring worship. By acting in history, revealing God’s Word, and drawing worshippers together, God initiates worship. Though many worship songs highlight the role of worshippers bringing praise to God, Reformed traditions have historically emphasized that worship starts with God’s activity. Rather than bringing a song as offering to God, worship is a response to divine action.

On the top CCLI list, several songs highlight an over-realized eschatology that places

human action and authority over God’s sovereignty, causing dissonance with the Reformed tradition. For example, “I Speak Jesus,” can seem like an “incantation,” where by simply saying “Jesus,” we seem to get what we want—an influence that can be associated with (if not attributed to) the legacy of the Word of Faith Movement’s emphasis on verbalizing one’s prayers and prophetic utterances so as to change one’s reality. This movement and its ways of speaking have had a tangible influence within Pentecostal-charismaticism at large and within the songs produced from within it. This is seen more overtly, in the bridge of “Champion,”¹⁶ which declares that suffering can be overcome easily: “When I open up my mouth miracles start breaking out.”¹⁷ Reformed communities may feel theological dissonance singing these lyrics.

In contrast, the Reformed-oriented songs emphasize God’s sovereignty in the face of suffering, adversity, and death. In “Christ Our Hope in Life and Death,”¹⁸ assurance comes through knowing Christ “holds our days within His hand” and “keeps us to the end.” Drawing from a popular Spurgeon quote, the song goes further, declaring that in adversity and in trial God will “send the waves that bring us nigh / Unto the shore, the rock of Christ.” In the song “He Will

16. Brandon Lake, et al., “Champion” (Bethel Music, 2019).

17. Though those Reformed theologians with cessationist beliefs would also strongly resist these lyrics, Dutch Reformed Theologian Abraham Kuyper’s *You Can Do Greater Things Than Christ* has been recently translated by Nigerian Christians desiring a holistic treatment of miracles through a Christological lens. See Abraham Kuyper, *You Can Do Greater Things Than Christ: Demons, Miracles, Healing and Science*, trans. Jan H. Boer, originally published as *Pro Rege* (Kampen, The Netherlands: J. H. Kok, 1911; republished in Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1991), 143–247, accessed June 27, 2025, <https://ccel.org/ccel/k/kuyper/greater/cache/greater.pdf>.

18. Matt Papa, Matt Boswell, et al., “Christ Our Hope in Life and Death” (Getty Music, et al., 2020).

Hold Me Fast,” worshipers sing that “when the tempter would prevail” and “through life’s fearful path,” “He will hold me fast.” The future joy and victory of the consummation are promised, but these songs speak of God’s faithfulness in and through suffering, while many of the non-Reformed CCLI songs point to using the name of Jesus as an escape or relief from all pain and suffering.

The Reformed-oriented lyrics are eschatologically oriented. Leaning toward the future hope in lyrics like “Til he return or call me home” (“In Christ Alone”) is prioritized rather than the inbreaking of the kingdom of God in the present moment as in “We’ll see you break down ev’ry wall / We’ll watch the giants fall / For fear cannot survive when we praise You” (“We Praise You”).¹⁹ Many Reformed communities would find CCLI songs with this over-realized eschatology lyrically and theologically dissonant.

However, the “already and not yet” of the kingdom is not without emphasis in Reformed theology, particularly in Abraham Kuyper’s *Lectures on Calvinism*, where he famously highlights the immediacy and comprehensiveness of Christ’s reign, declaring, “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: ‘Mine!’”²⁰ Though rare in many of these Reformed-oriented CCLI songs, this already-and-not-yet eschatology is evidenced in the poetic questions of “Is He Worthy?” where the lyrics ask, “Do you feel

the world is broken? / Do you feel the shadows deepen?” and even more directly when “Is all creation groaning?” is set against “Is the new creation coming?” Like the doctrine of election, eschatology divides and distinguishes many Christian denominations. With their hymnic structure and Reformed theology, those CCLI songs emerging from this tradition uniquely point to the consummation, but without a specificity that may exclude those from other traditions from singing their songs.

Though lyrical distinction is important to Reformed worshippers, the most popular Reformed-oriented songs could be considered Reformed “lite,” as they clearly highlight important themes, but in ways that are accessible to Christians from other traditions.

Discernment in Drawing from Other Repertoires

Though the Getty platform has provided a sub-repertoire of popular contemporary worship music, their approach is not the only option when attempting to harmonize Reformed theology with CCLI. Other Reformed theologians have encouraged discernment about song repertoire and expanding beyond CPWM. John Witvliet insists, “Pastoral musicians have the important and terrifying priestly task of placing words of sung prayer on people’s lips. ... To

19. Brandon Lake, et al., “We Praise You” (Bethel Music, et al., 2019).

20. Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Eerdmans, 1931), 488.

be a church musician is to be a spiritual dietician.”²¹ Encouragements like this, alongside James K. A. Smith’s work on liturgical formation,²² have led to many Reformed communities returning to traditional Western hymnody and rearranging these hymns. Of this shift from contemporary worship songs, Greg Scheer writes,

[T]hey seem to have felt a vacancy where creed, lament, and the deeper things of worship and life used to be. It was an empty space that couldn’t be filled with the stream of upbeat songs that flowed from the worship industry and flooded their families’ worship centers. These postmodern youth...longed for something more from their faith and their worship.²³

He continues:

Synchronizing with these historical patterns made participants aware that worship wasn’t only a form of personal expression—it was a means for faith communities to be formed in the faith. That is, worship was not just something you did—it actually did something. Naturally, this understanding of the formative power of worship caused leaders to look more closely at the music they used in worship.²⁴

Extending beyond the worship wars of “hymns versus choruses,” many in the Reformed tradition encourage theological and pastoral discernment in choosing from all different genres / origins / repertoires for congregational singing—indeed, we’ve also done just that in our original project report mentioned in the introduction. Rather than deconstructing the current trends in contemporary worship, Matthew Kaemingk and Cory Wilson draw from a Reformed view of *Soli Deo Gloria*, where all of life is an act of worship, and invite worship leaders to become “vocationally conversant” and reconcile worship and everyday work through liturgical acts, such as songs that affirm daily work as doxological.²⁵ Even Reformed Baptist John Piper argues for some “affirming truth” of Calvinism in the lyrics of the hotly debated song “Reckless Love.”²⁶ In the end, Piper pleads to worship leaders, “Please do your job, and do not ask too much of the sheep. As we sit in service, give us songs whose original meaning we can joyfully affirm because they are fully biblical.”²⁷

At the same time, despite these Reformed theologians’ encouragement of localized discernment to engage with all contemporary worship songs, the Gettys have gone a different direction by creating a subgenre of

.....

21. John Witvliet, *Worship Seeking Understanding* (Baker, 2003), 232.

22. See James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Baker Academic, 2019).

23. Greg Scheer, “Retune My Heart to Sing Thy Grace: How Old Hymn Texts Found a New Home among Evangelicals,” *The Hymn* 65, no. 4 (2014): 19.

24. Scheer, “Retune My Heart.”

25. Matthew Kaemingk and Cory B. Willson, *Work and Worship: Reconnecting Our Labor and Liturgy* (Baker Academic, 2020), 22-25.

26. Cory Asbury, et al., “Reckless Love” (Bethel Music, et al., 2017).

27. John Piper, “Should We Sing of God’s ‘Reckless Love’?” *Desiring God*, May 25, 2018, <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/should-we-sing-of-gods-reckless-love>.

Reformed-friendly modern songs within the CCLI ecosystem that potentially undercuts that important pastoral process.

Conclusion

Additional research is needed around the unique liturgical theologies and musical practices of Reformed-oriented groups, such as Mars Hill Music label based at Mark Driscoll's former church, John Piper's collaboration with Passion Conference (and the related artists), Sovereign Grace's unique blending of Charismatic and Reformed, and ecumenically oriented Reformed responses such as the music and worship emerging from projects and partners of the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship based at Calvin University. Assessing the distinctions and intersections of Reformed musical responses can enhance our ability to define what it means to be Reformed and to have Reformed postures toward CCLI songs that reflect the diversity of both of those markers.

Though some Reformed theologians encourage ways to discerningly harmonize Reformed theology with CCLI songs, in contrast, the Gettys have written and platformed a traditional-sounding repertoire of new hymns embedded with key Reformed theological themes that are accessible to evangelicals outside of the Reformed tradition. We opened this article by attempting to name the reality and distinctiveness of the

Getty platform in shaping a sub-repertoire within contemporary worship music as codified in CCLI's top song lists. Perhaps both the gift and challenge of this reality—for the Gettys and for the church—is that the Gettys have successfully created a contrasting theological and lyrical platform for songs that incorporate popular musical idioms that is, itself, a branded, commercial identity. How has the name "Getty" come to signal the "Reformed" for many worship leaders and communities and thus also narrowed the field for what is legibly Reformed and seen as possible within the current commercial structures of the contemporary worship music industry? Insofar as the Gettys work between their own alternative (and sometimes antagonistic) platform and the mainstream consumer structures of royalties and distribution, how much has the "medium" here also become the "message" in ways that are theologically forming Reformed communities of contemporary worshippers?

Rev. Dr. Jeremy Perigo is Professor of Theology & Worship Arts at Dordt University and has also served as a visiting lecturer and research supervisor at Regent University, Northern Seminary, the University of Aberdeen, and the London School of Theology.



Dr. Adam A. Perez is assistant professor of worship studies at Belmont University in Nashville, TN.



Does the Battle Belong?

Complexifying Anabaptist Approaches to Violent Language in Contemporary Worship Music

SARAH KATHLEEN JOHNSON, ANNELI LOEPP
THIESSEN, AND MYKAYLA TURNER

So when I fight I'll fight on my knees

With my hands lifted high

O God the battle belongs to You

—Brian Johnson and Phil Wickham, “Battle Belongs”

*The Spirit of Jesus empowers us to trust God in all areas of life
so we become peacemakers who*

renounce violence,

love our enemies,

seek justice,

and share our possessions with those in need.

—Mennonite World Conference, “Shared Convictions”

Anabaptist communities are committed to participating in God’s vision of peace, justice, and reconciliation. How do choices about music in worship relate to this commitment? In 2024, a group of Anabaptists leaders, pastors, and scholars gathered for a retreat to reflect on some of the most widely sung contemporary

worship music from an Anabaptist perspective.¹ Questions of how to interpret violent imagery were prominent throughout this discussion.

Anabaptists are Christians—followers of Jesus faithful to the Triune God encountered in the Bible. Anabaptist traditions, which include Mennonites, began in sixteenth-century Europe, and through immigration and global mission have become a diverse, worldwide community of churches. This project brought together people from different Anabaptist traditions that do not share theological resources (such as confessions of faith) or have pre-existing relationships through denominational structures.² However, they do share a common musical repertoire.

Anabaptists across traditions and cultures sing contemporary worship music, including songs found on the CCLI Top 100.³ The CCLI Top 100 is a list of the contemporary worship songs most widely reported for copyright purposes by churches across Christian traditions in a certain time frame and region.⁴ Our Anabaptist CCLI Top 100 and Beyond project focused on the version of this list that was available in the fall of 2024 which reported on songs used in the United States. We also explored other songs in similar styles that express a broader range of theological perspectives and that emerge from a diversity of sources, including songs by Anabaptist artists. Our process centered on a retreat weekend preceded by a preparatory video conference⁵ and preliminary analysis of the CCLI Top 100 by

.....

1. This program was made possible through a Vital Worship, Vital Preaching Grant from the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, Grand Rapids, Michigan, with funds provided by Lilly Endowment Inc.

2. The project specifically engaged Church of the Brethren, Mennonite Brethren, Mennonite Church Canada, Mennonite Church USA, and neo-Anabaptist perspectives. We are grateful for the contributions of Rashard Allen, Josh Brockway, Moses Falco, Savannah Locke, Christine Longhurst, Graciella Odelia, and Ertell Whigham. With Emily Ralph Servant, Anneli Loepp Thiessen and Sarah Kathleen Johnson served as co-directors of the Anabaptist CCLI Top 100 and Beyond Project. Mykayla Turner joined the group as a research assistant. We use “Anabaptist” as a broader term that describes a number of theological and ecclesial reform movements emerging in the sixteenth century. “Mennonite” refers to a specific subset of Anabaptist groups and is used in this paper when it is claimed by specific individuals or sources. In the context of this discussion, neither “Anabaptist” nor “Mennonite” refers to a specific ethno-cultural heritage.

3. We discuss the reception of contemporary worship music in Mennonite contexts, and the increase in the amount of contemporary worship music included in a recent Mennonite hymnal, in Sarah Kathleen Johnson and Anneli Loepp Thiessen, “Contemporary Worship Music as an Ecumenical Liturgical Movement,” *Worship* 97 (2023): 204–229.

4. Worship Leader Research, “The CCLI Top 100 Changed ... and Nobody Is Talking about It,” Worship Leader Research, February 5, 2025, <https://worshipleaderresearch.com/the-ccli-top-100-changed-and-nobody-is-talking-about-it/>.

5. Each participant prepared for the video conference by reviewing the top ten songs on the CCLI Top 100 and ranking them on a five-point scale. If a song received a “1” ranking, the participant saw it as very problematic from an Anabaptist perspective. If a song received a “5” ranking, the participant saw it as closely aligned with an Anabaptist perspective. The video conference was spent making introductions, sharing one or two songs per participant that received very high or low rankings, and identifying initial patterns in our reflections. This was followed by a discussion of key sources that were shaping each participant’s Anabaptist perspective (scripture, books by influential Anabaptist authors, etc.). The meeting concluded with initial suggestions of songs that could appear on a “Beyond” list to supplement the CCLI Top 100.

each participant.⁶ The retreat itself included times of worship, broader thematic discussions, and in-depth conversation about specific songs. Our Anabaptist CCLI Top 100 and Beyond process did not result in a definitive list of songs that are recommended for use in Anabaptist worship. Instead, it raised questions about whether such a list is possible or desirable, especially in light of the theology and internal diversity of the tradition.

This paper explores one case study of these dynamics: the place of language of violence—weapons, warfare, battle, and victory over enemies—in music for worship. We first outline the development of Anabaptist peace theology and describe the intercultural diversity of the Anabaptist tradition. We then consider the meaning of worship songs by employing three frameworks borrowed from biblical hermeneutics: (1) attending to the world behind the song, the world of the song, and the world in front of the song; (2) the Anabaptist understanding of hermeneutic community; and (3) Anabaptist reading strategies for wrestling with violence in scripture. We describe this method in detail below. We then apply these interpretive approaches in an in-depth case study that unpacks a diversity of Anabaptist responses to

the song “Battle Belongs” by Brian Johnson and Phil Wickham.

Anabaptist Peace Theology

Although the Anabaptist movement was diverse in origin and theology, a refusal to use violence, rooted in the words of Jesus, emerged as a key commitment of enduring Anabaptist communities.⁷ The “Shared Convictions” of Mennonite World Conference state:

The Spirit of Jesus empowers us to trust God in all areas of life so we become peacemakers who renounce violence, love our enemies, seek justice, and share our possessions with those in need.⁸

Wrestling with the nature of this commitment to peace has resulted in a diversity of Anabaptist peace theologies and a significant development in Anabaptist peace theology over the past five centuries.⁹

Janna Hunter-Bowman describes twentieth-century developments in Mennonite peace theology primarily in terms of “three waves.” The first wave of peace theology,

.....

6. Each participant was given access to a personalized spreadsheet listing all songs on the CCLI Top 100. Links to lyrics, a lead sheet, and a video recording were available for each song. There was a button beside each song with a dropdown menu, allowing participants to rank the song on a five-point scale (according to the definitions in the preceding footnote). There was also space for participants to make comments on songs that could inform their contributions to the retreat discussion.

7. C. Arnold Snyder, *Following in the Footsteps of Christ: The Anabaptist Tradition* (Orbis Books, 2004), 150–156. See “nonresistance” in the index of Troy Osborne, *Radicals and Reformers: A Survey of Global Anabaptist History* (MennoMedia, 2024).

8. General Council of Mennonite World Conference, “Shared Convictions.”

9. John Burkholder and Barbara Nelson Gingerich, eds., *Mennonite Peace Theology: A Panorama of Types*, 2nd ed. (Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2024).

shaped by the Second World War, focuses on conscientious objection and *nonresistance*. The second wave of peace theology, shaped by the social and political changes of the 1960s, emphasizes active participation, including nonviolent resistance, for *social transformation*. The third wave of peace theology retains a commitment to social transformation while reckoning with the silenced forms of violence—colonialism, antisemitism, racism, and gender-based violence—present *within the community* building peace.¹⁰ This third wave pays attention to “internal relations of power within the peacebuilding community.”¹¹ While all three waves remain present, the third wave is especially significant for our analysis of the CCLI Top 100 because of its intercultural character and our commitment to an intercultural process.¹²

Anabaptists and Interculturality

Internationally and within Canada and the United States, Anabaptists are culturally diverse. 84% of baptized believers who are part of Mennonite World Conference are from Africa, Asia, or Latin America; only 16% are from Europe and North America.¹³ Within North America, there are at least 22 languages spoken in Mennonite worship. Distinct worship patterns and musical

expressions are tied to specific communities and regions. In many of these Anabaptist communities, contemporary worship music is a primary musical language. For example, at C3 (Calvary Community Church) in Hampton, Virginia, contemporary worship music and Black gospel music are led by a band for this large and predominantly Black congregation. At Philadelphia Praise Centre, a multiethnic community with Indonesian roots, songs from the CCLI Top 100 are led in English or translated into other languages. In Southern Ontario, Kingsfield-Zurich Mennonite Church, a predominantly white congregation, worships primarily with contemporary worship music, including songs from the CCLI Top 100, that are led by a rotating roster of leaders ranging from high school students to retirees. These are just three examples that represent how contemporary worship music crosses cultures for North American Anabaptists.

As a movement, contemporary worship music itself is also intertwined with cultural diversity. While the CCLI Top 100 lists are dominated by music written by white men in the United States, these songs are sung in a variety of cultural contexts. Contemporary worship historians Lester Ruth and Lim Swee Hong, FHS, observe that by the mid-1980s—several decades into contemporary worship music’s development—this way of

10. Janna L. Hunter-Bowman, “Constructive Agency under Duress: A Research Note on ‘Witnessing Peace,’” *Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology* 26, no. 1 (2025): 47; Janna Hunter-Bowman, “Reckoning in Mennonite Peace Theology: Reinhold Niebuhr’s Realism and Four Waves of Development,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 14, no. 2 (2025): 7–34.

11. Hunter-Bowman, “Constructive Agency under Duress,” 44.

12. Hunter-Bowman, “Reckoning in Mennonite Peace Theology,” 20–27.

13. Mennonite World Conference, “About MWC,” Mennonite World Conference: A Community of Anabaptist-Related Churches, accessed May 16, 2025, <https://mwc-cmm.org/en/about-mwc/>.

worshipping was found in African American, Latine, and Asian contexts in North America.¹⁴ They give examples of leaders in contemporary worship from distinct cultural groups.¹⁵ While the CCLI Top 100 at the time of this project largely does not represent voices from these communities, the movement is nonetheless highly influential in shaping worship in diverse cultural contexts.

Despite the diversity of Anabaptist communities and their diverse engagement with contemporary worship music, white European cultural norms tend to remain dominant in Anabaptist settings, especially when it comes to defining what counts as “Anabaptist” or “Mennonite,” as Hyung Jin (Pablo) Kim Sun describes:

Faced with either maintaining the former ways or accepting newer approaches, generally, the dominant group use their power and authorities to define Mennonite cultures to create consistency, clarity, and uniformity. Yet, in so doing, they constrict the range of possible Mennonite identities and exclude the voices of people who do not agree with the dominant group, people who generally possess less power and influence.¹⁶

Anabaptists are culturally diverse, with a range of perspectives on theological

questions, but not all of these perspectives have been equally valued within the tradition. Informed by the reckoning of third-wave Mennonite peace theology, when engaging with contemporary worship music as a way of worship that crosses cultural boundaries, it is important to keep in mind that the same song can have very different meanings depending on social location. Central Anabaptist values and practices such as peacemaking may sound and look different in different cultural settings. We must care for nuances of identity and social context when determining whether or not a song is suitable for singing in Anabaptist worship because the meaning of songs in worship is impacted by individual and communal positionality.

Method: Interpreting the Meaning of Worship Songs

What is the meaning of a song sung in the context of a worship service? We draw on three approaches to biblical hermeneutics that are usually employed to interpret scripture as a method to interpret the significance of songs: (1) attending to the world behind the song, the world of the song, and the world in front of the song; (2) the Anabaptist

.....

14. Lester Ruth and Lim Swee Hong, *A History of Contemporary Praise & Worship* (Baker Publishing Group, 2021), 139.

15. Sandy Yu, the founder of Stream Praise Ministries for Chinese-speaking Christians; Marcos Witt, a key figure in Spanish praise and worship; and Judith McAllister, a popular African American worship leader and artist involved in Praise and Worship training. Ruth and Lim, *A History of Contemporary Praise & Worship*, 139–140.

16. Hyung Jin (Pablo) Kim Sun, *Building Mennonite Belonging: Toward an Intercultural Church* (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2025), 75.

understanding of hermeneutic community; and (3) Anabaptist reading strategies specifically focused on wrestling with violence in scripture.

Three Worlds of a Song

The meaning of the song is associated with the meaning of the text—the words that are sung. The meaning of these words is also shaped by the tune—the music that carries the words. However, the meaning of the song is not limited to text and tune. Drawing inspiration from biblical hermeneutics, we consider the meaning of the song as expanding beyond the *interaction between text and tune*, which is analogous to the “world of the text.”¹⁷ Meaning is also informed by the “world behind the text,” which refers to the *context of origin* of the song: the artist(s) and their communities; the culture and tradition of those communities; and personal or collective narratives related to the song. In addition, meaning is shaped by the “world in front of the text,” which refers to the *context of reception* of the song: how it is performed musically and framed in a particular worship service; its varied significance in different communities and its social impact in those spaces; and personal experiences participants associate with the song. All three

layers shape the meaning of a song, with different dimensions becoming dominant in different situations.¹⁸

Although we named these layers at the beginning of the CCLI Top 100 and Beyond process, we continually struggled with our role in relation to them. We primarily had access to “the world of the song”—to the text and tune—as they are presented on lead sheets and in recordings. We had some information on “the world behind the song,” although much is obscure to us, and most people who encounter the song in worship have far less access to this context of origin. We had even more limited information about “the world in front of the song”—how songs might be received in a diversity of Anabaptist communities. While we aspired to envision a broad range of Anabaptist communities, this merely reinforced the conclusion that the same song could mean very different things in different settings.

Since social location—the world in front of the song—contributes to the meaning of the song, each local Anabaptist congregation must function as a hermeneutic community discerning the meaning of songs in ways specific to their context through openness to the Spirit and in dialogue with one another.

.....

17. For an exploration of this framework in biblical studies, see W. Randolph Tate, *Biblical Interpretation: An Integrated Approach*, 3rd ed. (Baker Academic, 2008).

18. What makes a song “Anabaptist” may relate to any of these three layers. The theology of the “world of the song” may be Anabaptist, perhaps drawing on the theological writings of a sixteenth-century Anabaptist leader. The “world behind the song” may be Anabaptist, such as songs written by sixteenth-century Anabaptists or contemporary Anabaptist songwriters. The “world in front of the song” may also be Anabaptist, in terms of songs being received and owned as “ours,” even if they are without Anabaptist origin or content.

Hermeneutic Community

The notion of a “hermeneutic community” originates in the sixteenth-century Anabaptist practice of ordinary Christians gathering in small groups to read and study scripture together with the leading of the Holy Spirit. This egalitarian and communal approach to biblical interpretation has been further developed by contemporary theologians.

Carol Penner expands the notion of hermeneutic community to apply not solely to biblical interpretation, but to *all* instances of “people work[ing] out their theology.”¹⁹ This includes temporary or short-term instances, which we take to include our interpretations of contemporary worship music in a weekend retreat setting. Temporary hermeneutic communities can be especially important for attending to the perspectives of people who have been “excluded from sharing their voice equitably in other hermeneutical communities, such as denominational structures.”²⁰

Lydia Neufeld Harder likewise emphasizes the capacity of a hermeneutic community to critique the “consensus of tradition”²¹ by privileging the prophetic wisdom of historically marginalized members of the community:

Communities whose praxis is liberating for all its members can more readily discern the meaning of Scripture. ... The oppressed who have experienced the grace of God in their new-found liberation and freedom have a particular contribution to make.²²

This emphasis reflects the reckoning of third-wave Mennonite peace theology and fuses the notion of hermeneutic community with a commitment to being an intercultural church.

Reading Strategies for Approaching Violence in Scripture

As a historic peace church tradition, Anabaptist hermeneutic communities have long wrestled with the language and narratives of violence found in the Bible. In an essay included in the *Anabaptist Community Bible*, Melissa Florer-Bixler describes three “reading strategies” for approaching violence in scripture.²³

First, “*typological or spiritual reading*” of scripture involves mining the text for its “metaphorical and allegorical value.”²⁴ Even when the language is violent, there are non-literal or non-historical interpretations that might still be positively formative for

.....

19. Carol Penner, “Mennonite Women Doing Theology: A Methodological Reflection on Twenty-Five Years of Conferences,” in *Recovering from the Anabaptist Vision: New Essays in Anabaptist Identity and Theological Method*, ed. Laura Schmidt Roberts, Paul Martens, and Myron A. Penner (Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 71.

20. Penner, 71.

21. Lydia Neufeld Harder, *The Challenge Is in the Naming: A Theological Journey* (Wipf & Stock, 2018), 50.

22. Neufeld Harder, 56.

23. Melissa Florer-Bixler, “Violence and Non-Violence in the Bible: Anabaptist Perspectives and Interpretations,” in *Anabaptist Community Bible*, ed. John D. Roth (MennoMedia, 2024), 1560–1563.

24. Florer-Bixler, 1560.

the community. Communities may be able to more readily relate the violent text to their own circumstances if they employ this reading strategy, for example, by reinterpreting physical violence as a spiritual battle.

Second, “critical traditioning” acknowledges violent language in a text while drawing from the full scope of scripture and the Christian tradition to let the text both critique and be critiqued. The use of critical traditioning to engage with violent language ensures that hermeneutic communities directly address this language instead of dismissing or denying it.²⁵ For example, critical traditioning may engage in a dialogue with the three waves of peace theology that have been part of the Anabaptist tradition in the twentieth century.

Finally, a third strategy is “reading with the oppressed.”²⁶ According to Florer-Bixler, this approach to reading violent scripture texts combats centuries of using the Bible to justify violence *against* vulnerable people by reframing texts to show how God protects “communities and peoples who have historically suffered at the hands of those in power,” even to the point of “render[ing] destruction and demise on stronger nations.”²⁷

Interpreting violent language from the vantage point of the oppressed invites the texts to function as assurance of God’s hope, power, and freedom in the face of injustice.

We observed participants in the Anabaptist CCLI Top 100 and Beyond process applying each of these reading strategies to violent language in songs.

Case Study: “Battle Belongs”

With these three frameworks borrowed from biblical hermeneutics, we are better equipped to explore the complexities of violent language in contemporary worship music. While there are a number of songs that employ this imagery, we focus on “Battle Belongs” as a case study.²⁸

The Three Worlds of “Battle Belongs”

The *world behind the song* of “Battle Belongs” is typical for a CCLI Top 100 song. It was written by Phil Wickham and Brian Johnson, two prominent contemporary worship music leaders, both from California, and released in 2021. The duo wrote the song in a matter of minutes via Facetime. The song

.....

25. Florer-Bixler, 1561–62.

26. Florer-Bixler, 1562.

27. Florer-Bixler, 1562.

28. Violent language is employed in a variety of ways in CCLI Top 100 songs. For instance, “Battle Belongs” describes God fighting our battles on our behalf, whereas other songs describe how the singer becomes an agent to fight *with* God, such as “See a Victory” recorded by Elevation Worship: “Every war he wages he will win. I’m not backing down from any giant.” Ben Fielding, Chris Brown, Jason Ingram, and Steven Furtick, “See a Victory” (Essential Music Publishing, Hillsong Publishing, 2019). Certain songs include language of praise or singing as a form of violence towards enemies, such as “Praise (Lift Him Up)” by Elevation Worship: “Praise is the water my enemies drown in.” Brandon Lake, et al., “Praise (Lift Him Up),” (Capital CMG, et al.). Kelsey Kramer McGinnis calls this song into question in a recent *Christianity Today* article: Kelsey Kramer McGinnis, “Should We Sing about Drowning Our Enemies?” *Christianity Today*, November 21, 2023, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/2023/11/sing-enemies-elevation-praise-drown-imprecatory-psalms-wors/>.

was inspired by 2 Chronicles 20, where King Jehosaphat's army surrendered to worship in the face of a large and threatening army. In a video describing the song, Wickham highlighted how Christians today can surrender in the battle against sin and death:

There was an enemy that we are powerless against on our own called sin and death, and yet Jesus came, and he said, "You will not have to fight in this battle. Stand firm, hold your position, and see the salvation of the Lord on your behalf." So we can sing, "The battle belongs to you." So we don't have to pick up a sword and say, "This is what I fight with." We don't have to hold up a shield necessarily and say, "We're going to fight in a battle." But we come to our God and say, "The battle is yours. Whatever is happening, you are bigger. You are greater."²⁹

Wickham evidently views the song not as active participation in a battle, but as a call for Christians to surrender their weapons and leave the battle to God.

The *world of the song* includes pervasive battle language. The first verse sets up the battle as the premise of the song: "When all I see is the battle / You see my victory." The chorus then places the singer as one who fights in the battle, surrendering to God:

Verse 1

When all I see is the battle

You see my victory
When all I see is a mountain
You see a mountain moved
And as I walk through the shadow
Your love surrounds me
There's nothing to fear now
For I am safe with You

Chorus

So when I fight I'll fight on my knees
With my hands lifted high
O God the battle belongs to You
And every fear I lay at Your feet
I'll sing through the night
O God the battle belongs to You

Verse 2

And if You are for me
Who can be against me
For Jesus there's nothing
Impossible for You
When all I see are the ashes
You see the beauty
When all I see is a cross
God You see the empty tomb

Bridge

(An) Almighty Fortress You go before us
Nothing can stand against
The power of our God
You shine in the shadows
You win every battle
Nothing can stand against
The power of our God³⁰

.....

29. The JOY FM, "Phil Wickham on the Story behind the Song, 'Battle Belongs' | The Morning Cruise," YouTube, August 18, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CVTN-GTYkpQ>.

30. Johnson and Wickham, "Battle Belongs."

In the official music video—which is often the primary source for people learning the song—most band members raise their arms in worship during the chorus in an act of surrender: “So when I fight I’ll fight on my knees with my hands lifted high / O God the battle belongs to You.” The bridge transitions to imagery of God as an “almighty fortress,” using defensive language with the repeated refrain: “Nothing can stand against the power of our God.” Musically, the bridge also introduces a repeated militaristic drum line by a drummer who plays only for the first several iterations of the bridge. The song concludes with a chorus.

The *world in front of the song* is complex because violent language is experienced differently based on social context. This was named in our group by Ertell Whigham and Rashard Allen, who both represent Black Anabaptist perspectives, and who advocated for the importance of language of violence and victory in Black Anabaptist contexts as

speaking powerfully into experiences of oppression.³¹ In contrast, Savannah Locke, a member of the group who wrote her master’s thesis about violent language in contemporary worship music, argues that violent language has the power to actually *do* violence:

Words are [not] the same as physical violence. At the same time, language is not powerless. Words influence how we see God, others, and ourselves, and violent language does not align with a Cruciform Christ marked by self-sacrificial, enemy-loving love.³²

These group members brought their contrasting perspectives to our discussion of “Battle Belongs,” affirming what Black theologian and civil rights leader William B. McClain has observed: “Black folks are not always singing the same song the White folks are singing.”³³ This is only one example of how the worlds in front of the

.....

31. As another example, consider the work of Drew Hart, who describes himself as an “Anablacktivist” and calls Anabaptists to interrogate race and engage in other forms of activism. See Drew G. I. Hart, *Trouble I’ve Seen: Changing the Way the Church Views Racism* (Herald Press, 2016); Drew G. I. Hart, *Who Will Be a Witness? Igniting Activism for God’s Justice, Love, and Deliverance* (Herald Press, 2020).

32. Savannah Locke, “A Survey of the Top 100 CCLI Songs as They Relate to Violence,” (unpublished paper, Northern Seminary, August 2023), 4.

33. William B. McClain, *Come Sunday: The Liturgy of Zion* (Abingdon Press, 1990), 324. Kesha Morant Williams and Omotayo O. Banjo have similarly asked how race shapes how people engage with worship music. They ask: “Do African American listeners of gospel music listen because of a need to feel protected and victorious? Likewise, do White listeners of contemporary Christian music express a need for relationship or personal motivation?” This line of inquiry begins to offer language for how worshipers’ positionalities define their comfort or discomfort with particular language. They conclude: “Here we see direct connections between emphases on personal motivation and relationship in CCM to White listeners’ sense of personal and relational transition. In addition, we identify connections between emphases on conquering, protection, and positive confession in gospel music to gospel listeners’ sense of burden and lack of self-acceptance.” They trace Black listeners’ use of this language to a correlation with the type of systemic, long-lasting struggles that Black listeners are more likely to face. By contrast, white listeners identified struggles that were more temporary. Kesha Morant Williams and Omotayo O. Banjo, “From Where We Stand: Exploring Christian Listeners’ Social Location and Christian Music Listening,” *Journal of Media and Religion* 12, no. 4 (2013): 201–212.

song—different contexts of reception—can change the meaning of a song.

A Temporary Hermeneutic Community Employs Diverse Reading Strategies

Concerning the “world in front of the song,” our group discussion of “Battle Belongs”—including comments written in advance and in-person conversation—is an example of Anabaptists using the different reading strategies described by Florer-Bixler to interpret violent language in songs and to negotiate between the three waves of peace theology described by Hunter-Bowman.

Initial comments flagged the *battle imagery as problematic*:³⁴

Entirely based around battle imagery.

Warfare.

Prefer to lose the “battle” imagery, especially now in the context of US Christian nationalism ... I just think there are other ways to exalt God without language that pits some forces against others.

Military imagery and MUSIC.

A lot of imagery that can be misunderstood.

The pervasive language of violence in “Battle Belongs” is a concern for participants. However, an even greater concern is *whose battles*

are being fought and whether they are being won:

It’s very individualistic, making it “my” battle and “my” victory instead of something that is ours. Does that presume that all of the battles that I see are ones that God is going to fight and win?

Assume that God is going to win our battles on our behalf. But God doesn’t choose sides. God doesn’t fight our battles, we must choose to be on God’s side.

The bridge is particularly problematic in terms of “our God” winning “every battle”:

I disagree with the bridge—God wins every battle—and I think this sort of stands against (at least my experience of) neo-Anabaptism, which leaves room for God not getting God’s way.

The specific framing of the battle is thus particularly problematic.

At the same time, participants express appreciation for the *biblical foundations* of the song, reinforcing the parallel between interpreting scripture and interpreting song:

There are many good biblical allusions here.

Does this invoke stories like the battle where Moses held his hands high?

.....

34. The quotes included here are from notes that participants submitted on their initial evaluations of the songs, as well as summary notes of group conversation.

Wrestling with the violent language of scripture has been central to the development of Anabaptist peace theology.

We see participants employing different reading strategies in their comments. Some are more open to the imagery of the song if it is interpreted in *typological or spiritual terms*, such as referring to “spiritual warfare” or a battle with “fear”:

Heavy “war” language, but at least it’s likening prayer to spiritual warfare, which is less objectionable.

The opponent in this song is very abstract, which makes it hard for me to decide if it’s problematic or not. If it’s fear (as the chorus perhaps suggests), then this song feels quite uplifting, especially because it locates the victory over fear in God, not ourselves. If the battle belongs to God, it’s a battle that I don’t need to fight alone, or at all.

If the battle is not understood as physical violence, for some participants it is less problematic.

Others interpret the song through a process of *critical traditioning* with points of connection to the three waves of Anabaptist peace theology. Reflecting the first wave, focused on *nonresistance*, one participant notes:

If you’re going to have a battle song, this one most resonates with Anabaptist theology because it acknowledges that we aren’t meant to fight; we don’t have to use force because God is fighting the battles on our behalf (our battle is prayer, according to this song).

Other participants commented:

What does it mean to fight on our knees? To pray? To surrender?

It feels consistent with Anabaptist theology to fight “on my knees,” but why do we need to fight at all?

Second-wave peace theology, with its commitment to active engagement through nonviolent resistance for the sake of *social transformation* is also represented in responses:

“Fight on my knees” is a really helpful reframing of what fighting is. It’s still an active battle, but it’s not physical aggression. There are things that we fight, but it’s a question of how we fight and who we fight (e.g., systems rather than people). It’s not a lack of resistance, but it’s nonviolent resistance.

Finally, third-wave peace theology, reckoning with forms of violence within peace churches, is present, especially through the strategy of *reading with the oppressed*:

We seem to have a mainstream way of thinking about violence as Anabaptists, but the understanding is actually so wide (and we are trying to serve a broad range of Anabaptists). There’s already a cultural bias towards the mainstream way of Anabaptist thinking. For those of us who hold the mainstream perspective, there’s a tendency to consider other perspectives but not actually be influenced by them. How do we interpret Anabaptist values and understandings interculturally?

This perspective is especially significant when considering the importance of the

language of overthrowing oppression and ultimate victory for Black Anabaptist communities, as well as other communities that experience oppression both within Anabaptist traditions and in broader social contexts.

As we see in the example of “Battle Belongs,” the same song can have very different meanings. Anabaptists arrive at these meanings using similar interpretive strategies to those that are employed when encountering violent language in scripture, including gathering as hermeneutic communities (both temporary and local) to consider various reading strategies (such as typological reading, critical traditioning, and reading with the oppressed), and explore the three worlds of the song (context of origin, text and tune, and context of reception).

Conclusion

The Anabaptist CCLI Top 100 and Beyond process did not result in a list of recommended songs. In line with an Anabaptist emphasis on community discernment, our committee decided that we would not determine which songs should or should not be sung by Anabaptists. Instead, we tagged songs with themes that are significant from an Anabaptist perspective (such as community and peace) and provided commentary on these themes. Our hope is to distribute this work as a resource to guide discussion in local communities about how to engage

this repertoire.³⁵ We believe that local hermeneutic communities can best determine how their musical choices can contribute to God’s vision of peace, justice, and reconciliation.

An emphasis on local hermeneutic communities represents an Anabaptist approach to navigating choices about music in worship. Each community discerns with attention to its social location in an intercultural church, and thus each community may discern differently—there is no one correct Anabaptist practice. This approach does not offer tidy or clear descriptions of what communities should sing, but it does allow for nuance and complexity. Even when common conclusions are not met, deep and meaningful engagement across differences makes room for unity and diversity in perspective and practice.

This case study of Anabaptist engagement with violent language in a temporary hermeneutic community offers three conclusions for ecumenical reflection.

First, Anabaptist reflection on violent language draws on *diverse and evolving Anabaptist peace theologies* that may inform wider ecumenical discussions around violent language in songs. The third wave of Mennonite peace theology, in particular, reckons with forces like colonialism, racism, and gender-based violence in peacebuilding communities and invites more critical and nuanced reflection on violent language.

.....

35. Resources emerging from the Anabaptist CCLI Top 100 and Beyond project will be made available through Together in Worship, www.togetherinworship.net.

Second, other Christian traditions may also aim to *empower local congregations to act as hermeneutic communities* and discern how to approach the CCLI Top 100 in their own contexts, with attention to their social locations within an intercultural church. This approach has been modeled in the Anabaptist context, but it can be applied to a range of difficult topics that other communities engage in similar practices. For example, it resonates with an emerging emphasis on the communal discernment process of synodality in the Roman Catholic Church, the consensus model of the World Council of Churches, and sharing circles in some Indigenous Christian contexts. While Anabaptists may describe this as a “hermeneutic community,” the values and processes of community discernment are found across Christian traditions.

Third, our Anabaptist CCLI Top 100 and Beyond project created a *temporary hermeneutic community* that invited us into broader and deeper ways of understanding both the Anabaptist tradition and this specific repertoire of songs than what is available in each local congregation. By forming temporary hermeneutical communities, we engage in a wider conversation about contemporary worship music that can refine the decisions made at a local level. As Anabaptists

continue to wrestle with violent language in worship, and with other questions emerging from reflection on the most widely sung contemporary worship songs, the creation of hermeneutic communities that bridge culture, social location, and experience offers ways to imagine language that sings God’s justice and peace for all.

Rev. Sarah Kathleen Johnson, PhD, is Associate Professor of Liturgy and Pastoral Theology at Saint Paul University in Ottawa, Canada. She served on the editorial team for *Voices Together* (MennoMedia, 2020) and is the author of *Occasional Religious Practice* (Oxford University Press, 2025).



Anneli Loepp Thiessen is Assistant Professor of Music at Canadian Mennonite University. She was a committee member for the *Voices Together* Mennonite hymnal and researches women’s roles and experiences in the Christian music industry.



Mykayla Turner is a PhD student in the Faculty of Theology at Saint Paul University in Ottawa, ON. She conducts qualitative research on rural churches against the backdrop of Canada’s changing religious landscape.



USING HYMNARY.ORG FOR RESEARCH

Exploring Translations

Tina Schneider, FHS

IN LAST ISSUE'S column, I hinted at exploring translations in Hymnary.org (hereafter Hymnary). In this issue, we dive deeper into this topic, highlighting how Hymnary's data structure can reveal new areas for research.

Bridging meaning across languages and cultures is a profound responsibility. While I have worked extensively with many languages in Hymnary, I recognize that I am not a translator. I am acutely aware that readers of this column could be gifted translators and linguists; should my discussion here overlook certain nuances, I welcome your notes and insights.

The focus of this column will be on locating and connecting translations, and discussing enduring elements that fog the scene. Some translations are formal equivalents, keeping the imagery and language of a hymn as close to a one-to-one exchange as possible. Others make cultural adaptations and use imagery and metaphors that make sense in the translated context. How then do we track these variations? What are some of the complications we face in hymnody specifically?

In the library world, catalog records of translated materials have two fields: the title of the translation, and a "uniform title." For instance, a score of Mozart's opera "The Marriage of Figaro" would be linked to the uniform title "Le nozze di Figaro" by including both titles in the catalog record. Because all translations should include the uniform title, it is possible to follow it to browse through all known examples of this work, in any language.

In Hymnary, the equivalent in the authority records is the field for "Original Language Title," which appears in authority records as "English Title" or "German Title," etc., as appropriate. However, it does not provide a link to follow, and for good reason.¹ The field of hymnology is not quite so clear on the ever-present question of what constitutes the "original" text of a hymn. We do not always know or have access to the first iteration of a text, and long histories of alterations might confuse the issue even more. These vagaries can sometimes make it difficult to hang our hat on a uniform first line or title for a hymn. As a result, the "Original Language Title" field is more of a guide.

.....

1. Two examples of this: https://hymnary.org/text/jesus_me_gui_a_que_prazer and https://hymnary.org/text/o_bondoso_salvador_se_tu_meu_amparador. You will note that the name of the field changes to adopt the language of the original text.

Additionally, there is a “Languages” tab on the text authority pages to help guide you to translations, although this relies on bilingual instances to note that it is a translation of a specific text; while helpful, it is not always exhaustive.²

We also must remember that most of the historical data in Hymnary comes from the Dictionary of North American Hymnology (DNAH). The DNAH recorded the first lines of hymns, along with any authors or translators mentioned on the page in a hymnal, with each instance on a separate card, and without cross-references. It is critically important to note that a text’s status as a translation was not always available or made clear in the DNAH hymnals themselves. Early instances of a translated text might not have any attribution at all to a translator or author, or they name the translator as the author. (That is a question for actual translators to address!) Likewise, different translations of the same text have been known to start off with the same few words and then diverge; occasionally this has led to accidentally merged authority records that require editorial work to separate them.³ Murky, indeed.

Regardless of the complications, I think Hymnary’s growing global coverage offers a significant opportunity to do research with translations. How do we navigate Hymnary data in this area, then? I will share what I have found to be helpful, going from easiest to more challenging.

If you are interested in the translated works of a specific person, their page in Hymnary will easily lead you to translations, provided they have been cited as the original author in at least one instance. Note that each translation will likely have its own authority record, distinct from the text in its original language, unless it appeared in a bilingual context—more on that later.

If you are interested in a particular text with unknown or disputed authorship, and want to know if it has been translated, some text authorities have a Notes field where translations are, well, noted.⁴ This is a manual process, though, and undoubtedly incomplete.

What do we do when there is no documented tie between a text and its translation, then? Tune records can help bridge these gaps; if a text is commonly associated with a tune, it is possible to see which texts have been set to it. Not every text in a language different from the original will be a translation, of course, but it is worthwhile to see if there are contenders.⁵

A note about bilingual presentations of a text: In Hymnary, if a page presents a text in two languages, both are entered into the “First Line” field and both languages are entered in the “Languages” field, and then we move on. In cases with many languages (e.g., fifteen translations of the first stanza of “Amazing Grace”), the practice is still to enter the first lines of the first two languages in the “First Line” field, while listing

.....

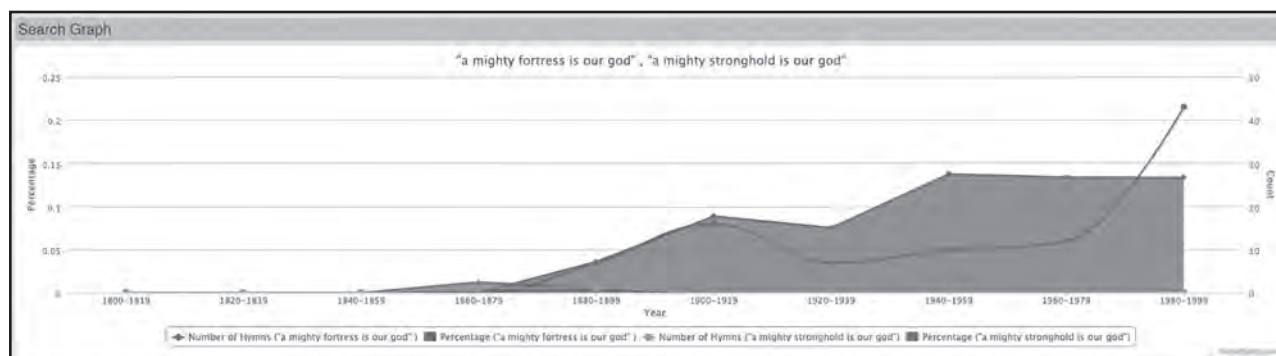
2. https://hymnary.org/text/a_mighty_fortress_is_our_god_a_bulwark

3. https://hymnary.org/text/desperta_ja_meu_coracao_wright and https://hymnary.org/text/desperta_ja_meu_coracao_costa

4. https://hymnary.org/text/ein_feste_burg_ist_unser_gott

5. https://hymnary.org/tune/he_is_lord_71232 .

Figure 1



all fifteen languages in the “Languages” field. As a result, a search for “Amazing Grace” in any of the fifteen languages will retrieve the record even if thirteen of them are not one of the first two languages presented on the page. Ideally, with a public domain text like “Amazing Grace,” there would be a page scan attached to the instance so that you can view all fifteen translations. Because most multi-lingual hymnals are “just” bilingual, entering the first two languages on the page covers the most common presentations of translations.

Of course, navigating all of this data has not yet brought us to new understandings about translations. What the Hymnary data offers is a way to trace the history of translations of a text, which then can be brought to questions about who, why, where, and how. We can see more clearly when translations were introduced, if they were superseded, or if they co-existed with other translations.

Hymnary’s “Compare texts” tool also offers a way to view representative texts side-by-side, a particularly compelling exercise given the liberties taken with translations.⁶ An advanced search for a text filtered by place of publication could reveal additional

insights, such as if translations published in Argentina might differ from those published in Mexico.

Finally, the “Search Graph” tool, located under “Browse Resources,” can be used to trace the use of a word or phrase over time. For example, we can see the history of two English translations of “Ein’ Feste Burg”: the more familiar “A mighty fortress is our God,” and a short-lived translation starting “A mighty stronghold is our God” (figure 1). How interesting it would be to apply this to any number of waves of translations.

I hope this tour of translations in Hymnary and its various tools will spark new ideas for historical research and highlight work that still needs to be done in documenting the global reach of congregational song. As we continue to refine these records, I look forward to seeing how your own expertise might fill the gaps in the data and help better tell the stories of cultural adaptations.

Tina Schneider, FHS, is the library director at The Ohio State University at Lima, and is a professor with Ohio State University Libraries.



.....

6. https://hymnary.org/text/santo_santo_santo_senor_omnipotente/compare

COPYRIGHT MATTERS

Attribution: Creation, Personality, and Copyright Law

Anne T. Gilliland

FOR MANY PEOPLE, copyright infringement and plagiarism are synonyms, since both involve copying material that belongs to someone else without permission; however, there is a difference between the two acts when it comes to the law. In general, an act of plagiarism can be avoided by some kind of attribution, such as citing a source or using quotation marks around an exact quotation. For the most part, copyright infringement cannot be rectified by attribution. Instead, to cure infringement, the infringer must either get permission from the rights holder or rely on a copyright exception, such as fair use, the exception for public performance during a religious service, and so on. Despite attempts to the contrary, disclaimers do not cure infringement. For example, it is not uncommon to see statements that accompany YouTube uploads that indicate that the uploader knows that the work belongs to another but hopes to mitigate the situation by saying “I do not own this song.”¹ In these instances, the rights holder

may elect to tolerate, overlook, or monetize the work, but they are not required to do so because acknowledgement does not negate the infringement.

Most people who create works want to be known as creators. There is a desire for honor, and recognition from others that reinforces the pride that creators have in their creations, what Jane Ginsburg has called “the dignitary interests that for many authors precede monetary gain.”² The recognition that attribution brings often leads to monetary success. At the same time, in my experience, this desire for attribution also exists among those of us who create works for private enjoyment or within a small social circle. When the U.S. Copyright Office solicited comments in 2019 for a report on “Authors, Attribution, and Integrity,” they received an outpouring of feedback on the importance of attribution for both emotional and economic reasons.³ So it is a paradox that attribution is not part of the copyright holder’s exclusive rights in the

.....

1. For example: “Fairyland by Angelzoom lyrics **I DO NOT OWN THIS SONG**,” accessed May 7, 2026, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qEwJR3dBwdQ>.

2. Jane C. Ginsburg, *The Most Moral of Rights: The Right to be Recognized as the Author of One’s Work*, *George Mason Journal of International Commercial Law* 8, no. 1 (2016): 44.

3. U.S. Copyright Office, “Authors, Attribution, and Integrity: Examining Moral Rights in the United States,” April 2019, <https://www.copyright.gov/policy/moralrights/full-report.pdf>.

U.S. outside of a small exception for works of visual art.⁴

Despite its weak place in U.S. copyright law, attribution has a strong social component and norms that vary with culture, time period, and profession. In one example from the past, Stephen Rose describes the development of a stronger culture of attribution in the German states of the 16th and 17th century.⁵ Over time, the attitude toward musical creations moved from the idea of the composer who was a mouthpiece of God's creation and who needed no personal recognition toward the idea that it was appropriate to associate an individual more personally with their works and compensate them more directly. Generally, these changes in attitude seem to occur when societies are more literate and develop more efficient technologies for distributing works.

In our own society and time, we see a variety of attitudes amid different professions and subcultures. For example, attribution in scientific publishing is widely shared and subdisciplines often have norms and rules about how attribution is allotted. Scientific articles may have dozens, scores, or even hundreds of named authors, and the order in which they are listed may relate to an individual's prestige rather than to the size of the contribution to the whole.⁶ For the purposes of royalties and contractual arrangements, song writing credits may be

apportioned to people who contributed relatively little to the song.⁷ Some professional norms for attribution may require citation to another person's ideas or body of work in situations where there is no copyright infringement at issue because there is no direct copying or quotation. Attribution can be, in itself, a statement about and from the creator who is looking back at older material, such as when a composer or hymn writer adds attribution to honor a traditional culture and individuals within that tradition that inspired the current creator.

There is often an economic component to the desire for personal recognition and credit. For example, academic citations often do not result in royalty payments, but attribution and citations may lead to increased prestige, promotions, economic bargaining power, and lucrative opportunities for speaking and consulting. Some of the saddest situations I worked with at universities have been when there had been no copyright infringement but a person's expectations around attribution and credit had been unfulfilled or violated, especially by a person in a position of greater power.

Today, almost all countries recognize the complex mixture of economic and personal attitudes that underpin creativity in copyright law and base copyright law on a foundation of moral rights, which might more accurately be called the personal rights of

.....

4. 17 U.S. Code §106A.

5. Stephen Rose, *Musical Authorship from Schütz to Bach* (Cambridge University Press, 2021).

6. Elisabeth Pain, "How to Navigate Authorship of Scientific Manuscripts," *Science*, May 6, 2021, <https://www.science.org/content/article/how-navigate-authorship-scientific-manuscripts>.

7. Richard Stim and Brian Farkas, "Ten Legal Tips for Songwriters: Credits, Copyrights, and Coauthors," Nolo, accessed May 7, 2026, <https://www.nolo.com/legal-encyclopedia/tips-songwriters-credits-copyrights-coauthors-29833.html>.

creators,⁸ as well as theories of economic rights and incentives.⁹ For centuries, the idea of moral rights was most completely developed in the law of many European countries, while the U.S. adhered to a more purely economic approach to copyright.¹⁰ That changed in the U.S. with its accession to the Berne Convention, the copyright treaty that almost all of the world's nations have joined that requires its signatories make some accommodation for moral rights within their copyright statutes. The U.S. joined Berne after many decades of reluctance in 1989. To comply with the moral rights requirement of Berne, Congress passed the Visual Artists Rights Act of 1990 the following year and extended some moral rights, including attribution, to unique works of fine art and small runs of fine art prints.¹¹

Why the reluctance to extend moral rights at all, and why has the U.S. not extended the right of attribution more broadly into its copyright law? The primary reason has been that doing so would disturb many contractual arrangements and practices around works made for hire because, for those works, the rights holder is the employer even if the creator is the employee. Since they are personal to the creator, the transfer of moral

rights is complicated or impossible in many countries. U.S. movement to a legal system that recognized these rights would necessitate an upending of many business practices and relationships. Expanding the exclusive rights to include attribution would also open the door for new and complicated discussions of copyright exceptions and copyright terms. In 2010, at the time of the 300th anniversary of the first copyright act, a group of legal experts considered the most pressing and desirable changes to U.S. law. They concluded that U.S. creators would benefit from a carefully written expansion of the attribution right while acknowledging the practical considerations involved.¹² Almost a decade later, in 2019, the US Copyright Office considered the same question, but recommended against adding a fuller right of attribution to U.S. copyright law. We continue to use a copyright system where attribution has incomplete representation.¹³

Anne T. Gilliland provides education and information on copyright and related subjects. She recently retired as the Scholarly Communications Officer at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill and holds a JD and an MS in Library and Information Science.



.....

8. Katharina de la Durantaye, "Dualist vs. Monist Approaches to Copyright Within the European Union," in *Research Handbook on Intellectual Property and Moral Rights*, ed. Ysolde Gendreau (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2023).

9. Darren Hudson Hick, *Artistic License* (University of Chicago Press, 2017).

10. Ibid.

11. U.S. Copyright Office, "Authors, Attribution, and Integrity."

12. Pamela Samuelson, et al, "Copyright Principles Project: Directions for Reform," *Berkeley Technology Law Journal* 25 (2010): 1175.

13. U.S. Copyright Office, "Authors, Attribution, and Integrity."

BOOK REVIEW

Shapers of The Hymnal 1982: Our Faith in Words and Music

Marty Wheeler Burnett. Church Publishing, 2025. ISBN 978-1-64065-814-1 (paperback); ISBN 978-1-64065-815-8 (eBook). 147 pp. \$22.95 (paperback); \$21.99 (eBook).

In the introduction to her book, Marty Wheeler Burnett cites an article by Raymond F. Glover, general editor of *The Hymnal 1982 [H82]*, “for those desiring more in-depth study.”¹ While Glover’s article is excellent, Burnett’s account takes a very different approach.

During the COVID-19 shutdown, looking for ways to engage students who were not in a physical classroom, Burnett set out to collect video interviews with living members of the committee that produced *H82*. Later, she drew upon those interviews, email correspondence, and archival materials of at least two deceased members of the committee to organize their accounts into a narrative that became this book.

The book contains 15 short sections: introduction, 12 numbered chapters, epilogue, and a final look to the future. Each section contains extensive accounts from those directly involved with the production of *H82*. Among those contributors are Carl P. Daw, Jr., FHS, Elizabeth Morris Downey, Carol Foster, Raymond Glover, David Hurd,

Marilyn Keiser, David Ashley White, and Rae Whitney.

The first five chapters begin with the publication of *H82* and then chronicle the process by which it came to be, from the establishment of its editorial committee, through the publication of trial supplements, to its adoption. Chapters 6 and 7 provide views into the process of selecting service music settings and hymn texts. Chapters 8–10 have accounts from authors of new texts, composers of tunes, and those involved in editorial matters. After Chapter 11—a view into the spirituality of *H82*—the last chapter and final two sections look toward the future. At the end, as in a “Sunday School book,” there is a set of discussion questions for each of the numbered chapters followed by a list of hymns that might be sung during each discussion.

There are several aspects of Burnett’s book that I find particularly valuable. The first is the way in which she weaves the words of her informants into an engaging narrative. A second is its clarity regarding the hymnal committee’s understanding of the need for a denominational hymnal to be comprehensive enough to serve a variety of contexts, including very small congregations, seminaries and religious orders, as well as large, well-resourced parishes and cathedrals. I believe the aspect that makes it most valuable is that the narrative reviews the past

.....
1. Raymond F. Glover, “The Creation of The Hymnal 1982,” in *The Hymnal 1982 Companion* (Church Hymnal Corporation, 1990).

not simply to dwell there, but to serve as a guide for the future. This becomes clear in its final chapter and the two sections following. Episcopal clergy and musicians will, of course, find it valuable. I believe anyone deeply involved in the worship life of the church, regular worshipers as well as liturgical leaders, will find Burnett's book engaging and thought-provoking.

M. Milner Seifert was a choral director at Evanston Township High School, choir director in two different Episcopal parishes, and an instructor in liturgical music at Seabury-Western, later Bexley Seabury Seminary. He is a life member of The Hymn Society.

Please submit books and media for review to:



Beverly Howard,
Book and Media Review Editor
hymneditor@aol.com
1600 Texas Street #21003
Fort Worth, TX 76102, USA

Association of Lutheran Church Musicians

40th Anniversary of ALCM's 1986 Constituting Convention

July 13–16, 2026

St. Olaf College, Northfield, MN

Overlapping with

Lutheran Summer Music's Festival Week!

Featuring Bach's

St. Matthew Passion

Bach Collegium Valparaíso

Christopher M. Cook, Artistic Director

Made possible through generous support provided
by Pauline and John Kiltinen.



**Workshops with
noted clinicians:**

Anton Armstrong
Workshop Leader



*A national worship and music conference for all
musicians, pastors and worship leaders.*

**For more details,
visit alcm.org**

UNITED IN SONG

Discover the music that unites
cross-generational communities.
OCP hymnals offer balanced repertoires
with options focused on traditional
or contemporary styles, Spanish and more.

NEW! Glory & Praise

Journeysongs

Flor y Canto

Spirit & Song

Thánh Ca Dân Chúa



Learn more at
ocp.org/hymnals





THE HYMN SOCIETY

5 Thomas Circle, NW, 4th floor
Washington, DC 20005-4153

PERIODICAL POSTAGE
PAID AT
WASHINGTON, DC
AND
ADDITIONAL
MAILING OFFICES



THE HYMN SOCIETY

ANNUAL CONFERENCE

July 19-22, 2026

Princeton Theological Seminary
Princeton, New Jersey

rebirth

SINGING DEATH, SINGING LIFE

REGISTRATION: www.thehymnsociety.org/event

SING!

THE
CENTER FOR
CONGREGATIONAL
SONG



KERI DAY



MIRIAM SPIES



NATE STUCKY

