



Mary Nelson Keithahn Honored as Fellow of The Hymn Society

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 Placerville 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