



Karen Westerfield Tucker Honored as Fellow of The Hymn Society

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