

# Introducing *Glory to God* to Your Church

*This is one in a series of articles introducing Glory to God, the new Presbyterian hymnal.*

What is this book, purple and crimson,  
chock full of notes both new and old:  
metrical psalms, praise tunes, and hymns  
on God's greatest stories ever told?  
This is a book that helps us profess  
to whom our lives belong  
in liturgy and song.

Hymn parodies walk a tricky line: one person's "clever" is all too easily another person's "offensive." Where on this line would you put a plea for Lenten disciplines, modeled after Passover observances, titled "Just a Kosher Walk with Thee"? How about a song extolling the contributions of a new and much-needed male voice to the choir: "Amazing Bass, How Sweet the Sound"?

Less iffy, I suspect, than either of the above examples—perhaps because the text being parodied is less familiar—are the lines at the beginning of this study. "What Is This Book" mimics a text by Dutch pastor Huub Oosterhuis that was rendered into English by London-born teacher David Smith. Writing about the church, the author poses the question,

"What is this place where we are meeting? / Only a house, the earth its floor . . ." These words, as well as my parody of them, are set to a charming seventeenth-century Dutch tune, KOMT NU MET ZANG, which is appearing for the first time in a Presbyterian hymnal in *Glory to God*.

There are a number of important issues for worshipers first encountering *Glory to God* and for worship leaders facilitating its introduction. The purple or crimson hymnal is, indeed, "chock full of notes": not just musical notes, as would be expected in a song collection, but also verbal notes. Every hymn or song, with the exception of service music (sung liturgical texts such as *Gloria* or *Kyrie*), is annotated with a brief "program note" sharing something about the piece's history, authorship, music, or theology.

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“Metrical psalms,” both old and new, form an important part of the contents, honoring the fact that our forebears who worshiped in Calvin’s Reformed tradition sang only psalms translated from their original linguistic forms into regularly metered, rhyming verse. “Hymns” by human rather than divinely inspired biblical authors were relative late-comers into the Presbyterian repertoire, although today they constitute a major component of our singing. Of even more recent vintage are “praise tunes” from the blossoming of contemporary Christian music in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Several time-tested examples of this genre have made their way into *Glory to God*, representing the rich diversity of modern worship styles.

Whatever their vintage, all the songs included share a common focus on “God’s greatest stories ever told.” In fact, the ordering of hymns in *Glory to God* follows the outline of salvation history, beginning with the triune God who has been for all eternity; moving through God’s creation of the world and care for its inhabitants in calling and covenant; continuing into anticipations of a coming messiah and the climactic events of the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus; picking up again with the descent of the Spirit and formation of the church; and culminating in the looked-for return of Christ and the creation of a new heaven and a new earth. More about this organizing framework can be found in the theological vision statement written by the Presbyterian Committee on Congregational Song to guide our work. *Glory to God* includes this statement as an appendix to the hymnal.

People accustomed to the liturgical-year structure of the 1990 Presbyterian hymnal will find this structure in *Glory to God* as well, but within the broader framework of God’s gracious acts: Advent coincides with anticipations of the Messiah; Christmas, with Jesus’ birth; and so on. Those accustomed to looking for the Psalms in one central section, as they appeared in 1990,

will instead find them within their respective salvation-story themes (Psalm 8, “O Lord, Our God, How Excellent,” is in the section titled “Creation”; Psalm 19, “Your Law, O Lord, Is Perfect,” is in “God’s Covenant with Israel”; Psalm 72, “All Hail to God’s Anointed,” is in “Christ’s Birth”). A specific psalm listing within the scriptural index at the back of the book facilitates the search for individual psalms.

Because God has shown us such grace through salvation history, we respond with gratitude. This response begins as we come together to learn what God has done; hence, the service music of “The Church at Worship” forms the central section of the book. Following it are hymns expressing our adoration and dedication to the One “to whom our lives belong.”

In *Glory to God* we profess our faith in this God not only through a variety of sung forms, but also through spoken liturgy. The book contains roughly thirty pages outlining orders of service for the Lord’s Day (including the celebration of the Lord’s Supper); for baptism; for morning, evening, and night prayers; and a collection of other texts for use in worship such as the Nicene Creed, the Apostles’ Creed, the Ten Commandments, and A Brief Statement of Faith.

What, then, is this book? Robed in purple or crimson, it is a treasure trove of biblical study, church history, poetry, music, and theology, offering up riches to shape the faith and life of God’s people for generations to come.

## “Do Not Neglect to Show Hospitality” (Heb. 13:2)

How can we best introduce this treasure trove to others? First off, we should remember that leaders facilitating the transition to a new hymnal do not need to persuade the *early adopters* (whose enthusiasm is already likely to have fueled the vote to purchase new materials); nor do we need to convert the *never adopters* (who are still wondering why the *last* hymnal was put in the pews).

Rather, our challenge is to appeal to those *middle adopters* who, as a reasonable habit, will question any change before endorsing it personally.

The following paragraphs offer specific suggestions for introducing a new hymnal to this group—and, coincidentally, to the rest of a congregation. The guiding metaphor is one of hospitality. How would we go about introducing a visiting friend to our home congregation so that she and they might form the best first impression of one other? We would probably not begin by reciting her entire history, listing all her degrees and accomplishments, friends, and relations. “Too much information,” as the current colloquialism puts it, constitutes a barrier rather than a bridge

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to communication. Rather, we would focus on a few points of interest likely to establish common ground: “This is my friend Sarah; she’s a Buckeye fan,” or “she goes fly-fishing on weekends,” or “she used to volunteer one night a month at the homeless shelter of her inner city congregation.”

But too little information is also a barrier to building relationships. In using the metaphor of hospitality, I am assuming that we truly want our congregations to welcome the new hymnal as they would welcome a new friend or prospective new member. This means that we cannot simply have the book show up in the pew racks on a given Sunday, unanticipated and unannounced, and expect a response other than resistance from the middle adopter majority. A thoughtful process of preparation is crucial. A countdown, like an Advent calendar, can help prepare the way. “Quick Facts” in the church newsletter, on the church Web site, or on a church bulletin board

can serve a function analogous to the well-crafted introduction of a visitor.

Information to share in an introduction to the new hymnal should consist of facts that are interesting to your own congregation. For example, does your congregation have members who come from a Dutch reformed tradition? Let them know about Dutch tunes and translated Dutch texts in *Glory to God* (like Huub Oosterhuis’s “What Is This Place”). Do your members enjoy gospel songs? Be sure to tell them that “I Love to Tell the Story,” “Leaning on the Everlasting Arms,” and “Shall We Gather at the River” are part of the new book. Do you have an African drumming group, or would you like to form one? Highlight the

wealth of songs from Africa that you will soon be able to sing together to lively rhythmic accompaniment. Do you have a partner church in a Latin American country? Look at the number of Spanish language hymns

you can learn to sing in both English and Spanish for your next visit with them. Is Bible study an important part of your Christian nurture program for children, youth, and adults? Let people know that every book in the Bible (even Obadiah and Philemon!) is referenced in at least one hymn or song, and that hymns average over six biblical references apiece.

Hard as it may be for innovator and early adopter types to restrain their enthusiasm, we need not rush to begin using the new hymnal church-wide the minute a shipment of boxes arrives from the publisher. Think again of that visiting friend: would you introduce her to the whole congregation at once, or might you instead take her to a smaller group gathered at the coffee hour, or in a learning hour class, and make initial introductions there? Extending the analogy, think about what groups in your congregation might be best-suited to make an early acquaintance with

the new hymnal. People respond more favorably to change if they have a role to play in the process. So, what individuals from the cautiously inquisitive, middle adopter group might you enlist to study the new hymnal and help teach others about it?

## “Seek and You Will Find” (Matt. 7:7)

This series of lessons provides one possible starting point for such a study. If you think your congregation would prefer a more informal way to engage with these questions than an organized learning hour, you might send a select group of people off with copies of the new hymnal and instructions to conduct a sort of scavenger hunt for answers to the following questions (and possibly generating further questions and answers of their own).

1. Did you know some hymns in the former hymnal so well that you even knew what *number* they were? Check to see if your “number-known” hymns are still present in *Glory to God*. Since more than 65 percent of the former hymnal carried forward, the odds are good that they will be. What are their *new* numbers?

2. Look for hymns that appear in *Glory to God* in more than one language. Where does the English text appear on the page relative to the music? Is this the same or different from other hymnals?

3. Look for hymns with five stanzas. “The Church’s One Foundation” is one example; “I Greet Thee, Who My Sure Redeemer Art” is another. Where does the fifth stanza appear on the page in relation to the lines of music? How does this compare with other hymnals? What about hymns with six stanzas (for example, “Our God, Our Help in Ages Past”)?

4. Have you ever participated in a Taizé worship service? What pieces of music can you find that are attributed to Jacques Berthier or the Taizé community?

5. Have any members of your church ever visited the island of Iona off the coast of Scotland?

What songs can you find attributed to John Bell and Graham Maule or the Iona Community?

6. One of the most popular “new” songs from the 1990 hymnal is “Here I Am, Lord.” Is anything else by the same author in *Glory to God*? Another popular one from the 1990 hymnal is “God of the Sparrow,” with words by Jaroslav Vajda and music by Carl Schalk. What pieces have they contributed, together or separately, to the 2013 collection? (Note: Authors and composers appear in a single index in the back of *Glory to God*, whereas some other hymnals contain separate indexes for authors/translators and composers/arrangers.)

7. Who are the authors or composers responsible for your personal favorite hymns (whether you recall their hymn numbers or not)? How well represented are these writers in the new book? What do you learn about them and their works from the accompanying program notes?

8. Not all Advent hymns are located in *Glory to God* in the section just before carols celebrating the birth of Jesus. Some, like “Sleepers, Wake!” and “Lo, He Comes with Clouds Descending” appear in a much later section. Why?

9. How many hymns appear in the baptism section of *Glory to God*? How many in the section devoted to the Lord’s Supper? How does this compare with other hymnals?

10. Generally speaking, when a hymn or song appears in *Glory to God* in a language with a non-Roman alphabet (e.g. Korean or Mandarin Chinese), how is the other language rendered? Contrast, for example, the appearance of “Lonely the Boat” in *Glory to God* and some other hymnal.

In the process of seeking answers to these questions, people will independently discover a number of key ways in which *Glory to God* differs from its predecessors. Provide opportunities for such findings to be shared, inviting speculation about why the Presbyterian Committee on Congregational Song made the choices it did in these areas. Such experiential and analytical learning will help people “befriend” the new hymnal far better

than simply placing it in the pews and expecting them to sing out of it without the benefit of further introduction.

## Make New Friends, but . . .

Once the hymnal *is* in the pew racks, the process of introducing it to the full congregation must still move with appropriate caution—like porcupines passing the peace. Some congregations will be more accustomed than others to trying new music; some will have already encountered many of the new songs from *Glory to God* through their work as test sites during the process of hymnal creation, or through their use of the 2011 and 2012 samplers. Some worship planners have for years taken weekly advantage of their church’s copyright license to create bulletin inserts that incorporate materials not in the congregation’s pew hymnal. Some congregations do not use a print volume at all, but regularly download new material to project onto a screen.

Churches thus function along a continuum of comfort with novelty: from “eagerly explores new material at every service, never singing the same thing twice” to “engages in threats of membership withdrawal and non-payment of pledges if anything beyond a familiar twenty songs is ever attempted.” Most congregations exist somewhere between these extremes. As noted in the previous study, people resist change not so much from lack of vision as from fear of loss. They need reassurance that the old hymns that have been so important in their journeys of faith have not disappeared. Making new friends is much easier when we are confident that we may also keep the old.

A wise worship planner, therefore, will resist the temptation to do too many new things too fast. Many of a congregation’s old favorite hymns are likely to be included in *Glory to God* since the selection of materials for the collection was informed by survey data about what people found most meaningful to sing. If you do not actually know what your congregation’s favorite hymns are, now would be the perfect time to find out with a survey in the church newsletter or a suggestion box in the narthex. Find those hymns in the new hymnal and *use them*.

And take a tip from John Calvin. When his colleagues Clément Marot and Louis Bourgeois had composed a new metric psalm for his congregation in Geneva, he had them first teach it to the children. *Glory to God* is filled with simple, engaging songs from all over the world that a children’s choir or Sunday school class could easily learn. If the children lead, the adults will follow, exploring together the riches in our new musical treasure trove.

Sing new songs, but keep the old:  
one is silver, and the other, gold.

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