

I have two anecdotal stories about the place of hymnbooks in our Mennonite tradition. 15 years ago, or so, one of the faith-based magazines to which we have subscribed had on its cover a picture of students who were in a shared housing arrangement a part of their university. The members of this house each came from a unique faith tradition. The university was encouraging inter-faith dialogue among the next generation of world leaders, and this housing project was a part of their plan. Lo and behold, a Mennonite was among this auspicious group. Each house member carried the sacred book associated with their faith tradition. The Muslim student had a Koran; the Jewish student a copy of the Torah; and so forth. What struck me in the picture was that the Mennonite was not holding up a bible or a confession of faith. Rather, she held a song book; *Hymnal: A Worship Book*. How interesting, I thought, that for many who call a Mennonite Church home the music which is made on any given Sunday represents the sacred word of God. In fact, there were a few respondents in one of our Church Council surveys in 2020 who plainly stated that unless we are able to sing there is no point in attending worship in person. Maybe those respondents were speaking in hyperbole, but the fact is that more than a few of us find our hymns and singing to be sacramental—imparting grace, reminding us of God’s steadfast love and mercy, strengthening our trust of God, building up of Christ’s body (the church), encouraging charity. Singing, our hymns, are sacramental. The hymn book is one of our holy books.

“Hymnals are generational. They reflect the rhythms of the Holy Spirit, moving among God’s people in a particular era. As worship rhythms develop new currents, the language of a recent generation needs to expand too. *Voices Together* succeeds *Hymnal: A Worship Book* (1992) and its two supplements, *Sing the Journey* (2005) and *Sing the Story* (2007). The time between the publication of *The Mennonite Hymnal* (1969) and *Hymnal: A Worship Book* was 23 years. The publication of *Voices Together* in fall 2020 marked 28 years since the publication of *Hymnal: A Worship Book*.”¹

From 1988-1992 I was a student at Bethel College. I remember the Hymnal Sampler which led the way for the fuller *Hymnal: A Worship Book*. It wasn’t the brown hymnal, many of us observed, but it wasn’t bad and certainly it could be worse. So we got to know HWB, and even learned to appreciate it. I expect the same will be true for *Voices Together*.

¹ <http://voicestogetherhymnal.org/about/history-of-the-project/>

I do not want to go too deeply into the manner in which this new worship resource has been crafted, but a bit history may be good. “In spring 2008, Mennonite Church Canada, Mennonite Church USA, and...Mennonite Publishing Network started exploring the need for a new hymnal by surveying worship and music leaders in Mennonite congregations...Out of that study, congregations were asked to submit the songs sung each week via an online survey.

In late 2014, the Joint Executive Committee of Mennonite Church Canada and Mennonite Church USA commissioned MennoMedia to develop this new worship and song collection with the understanding that it should do so in close partnership with both denominations...The committee has worked prayerfully on this task, meeting in person three times per year. Their final meeting was in October 2019, although production work continued into the next year.”² What we have is a by-product of congregational input and the committee’s discernment. It isn’t the blue hymnal, many of us will observe, but it isn’t bad and certainly it could be worse. So we will get to know *Voices Together* and even learn to appreciate it. It will be much like what I experienced back at Bethel College in those years of hymnal transition. It may even come to be seen as sacramental, a holy book, by some of us and our young people.

We will conclude this part of the worship service with a responsive reading dedicating the *Voices Together* in this place and among us. Thank you to Susanne who tracked down this prayer.

Patrick Preheim, co-pastor NPMC

Leader: As we dedicate *Voices Together*,

All: we join our voices

Leader: with the voices of those who taught us to sing and pray:
friends, family, church communities,
those who stand beside us, and those we have never met.

All: We join our voices

Leader: with the voices of those who go before us in faith:
16th-century Anabaptists and medieval mystics,
20th-century activists and early communities of Jesus followers.

All: We join our voices

Leader: with the voices of those we know from Scripture:
Paul and Silas in prison, Mary overcome with joy,
Miriam and Moses, psalmists, and prophets.

² Ibid.

