



## Wey Valley Methodist Circuit – Pastoral Letter 2022 Rev Barrie Tabraham

### *“Hymns for all seasons” – a personal reflection (Part 2)*

Dear friends,

I felt I ought to add some ‘balance’ to my previous article on hymnody, in case you felt I was being over negative and simply hearkening back to the ‘good old days’! *Singing the Faith* has had its fair share of criticism – as, indeed, did *Hymns & Psalms* before it – but it contains a store of treasures if we take the trouble to explore it.



And I need hardly add that we now have *Singing the Faith* **Plus**, not to mention electronic versions for piano & organ accompaniment, Kindle and Braille. (see the illustrations from left to right opposite). No one could accuse Methodism of being out of date! So now I want to approach it from three slightly different angles, as it were.

#### **(1) First, *Singing the Faith* is AN ECUMENICAL HYMNBOOK**

Our hymnbook is ecumenical – it straddles all denominational boundaries. Whilst the different churches strive towards a greater understanding of each other’s traditions and seek to approach each other more closely, the thing’s done for us here already, in our hymnbook.

Thankfully, we are past the age when Methodists used to refuse to sing a hymn because it was written by, say a Roman Catholic, or – worse still – they would close their hymnbooks with a ‘snap’ because as Wesleyans, they recognised the hymn was written by a Primitive Methodist (or vice-versa!). No one would think these days of questioning the denominational allegiance of the hymn-writer!

We have hymns in this book which represent all Christian traditions – just to give you 2 examples:

From **Roman Catholic** writers, who doesn’t love **StF 334 Praise to the Holiest in the height** – written by John Henry Newman (1801-1890), an Anglican divine who was received into the Roman Catholic Church. And one of the hymns I love most, **StF 416 There’s a wideness in God’s mercy like the wideness of the sea**, was written by another Roman Catholic, Frederick William Faber (1814-1863).

And at the other end of the denominational ‘spectrum’, as it were, if we conducted a little survey amongst ourselves and listed our 10 favourite hymns, I’m quite sure that among them would be a hymn by a representative of a Christian denomination that normally doesn’t sing hymns at all – ‘The Friends’ – **the Quakers** – and the author is John Greenleaf Whittier: **StF 495 Dear Lord and Father of mankind**, though we’ve only got one of his hymns in our current book; two classics – **Immortal love, forever, full, forever flowing free**, and the wonderful: **Who fathoms the eternal thought, who talks of scheme or plan** have both, alas, been dropped. Of course, they were originally *poems*, then adapted to become hymns – and pretty good ones at that!

#### **(2) Secondly, *Singing the Faith* is, in effect, HYMNS, ‘ANCIENT & MODERN’**

You will know that I always like to have my cake *and* eat it, and I recall Jesus saying on one occasion that a good disciple is like a wise house-holder who ‘brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old’. You and I can have *both*, and we dare not impoverish our worship by clinging madly to the past on the one hand and rejecting anything that wasn’t familiar to our grandparents, *or* on the other – tearing after everything that’s new and discarding all the accumulated wisdom and experience of the past. Why not have the best of *both*? We’ve got both old and new here in *Singing the Faith*.

**First, two examples of the very old:-** When you’ve got a moment, have a look at **StF 143 Hail, gladdening Light, of his pure glory poured**. It’s a translation of a very old Greek hymn, written in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD – sung at the lighting of the lamps. When the shadows gathered in the gloom in the homes of those early Christians, or possibly in the catacombs where they met to escape persecution – the little tiny wicks floating

in the oil of the lamps gradually lit, one by one and filling the whole place with light – and the congregation would sing “*Hail, gladdening Light, of his pure glory poured . . .*” and thought not only of the light illuminating the darkness, but of the one true light that had come into the world – their Lord Jesus Christ.

And when we sing it – probably not often enough as we have fewer evening services, alas – we are linking hands across the centuries with those brave, faithful souls who often worshipped in fear of their lives.

And there is another hymn which we sing during Advent, which is very old indeed – written originally in Latin in the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD. – **StF 181 *Of the Father’s love begotten.***

**Charles Wesley:** Speaking of ‘old’, or rather, the traditional hymns, Charles Wesley’s hymns deserve a talk to themselves, so I won’t say much here, apart from the fact that we shall be singing some of them – such as **StF 202 *Hark! The herald-angels sing*** as long as people have voices to sing.

The number of hymns in the hymnbook by Charles Wesley has, inevitably, declined over the years: the MHB there were more than 250 out of 984; [Note that they never had a 1000, because churches would have to buy new hymn-boards! – nowadays, we have screens etc., so it doesn’t matter!] in *Hymns & Psalms* it was 156; in the present hymnbook the total has shrunk to 79 and only three of his brother John’s have survived.

But all I would say about Charles Wesley’s hymns is that – and this is the reason perhaps why they have endured – is that in an almost unique way they fuse two elements that are not always found in hymns and sacred poetry: they combine orthodox theology with passion; they combine fidelity to Scripture but at the same time are utterly personal. Some hymns have good theology but are rather dry and formal; others are personal and passionate, but tend to be rather sentimental and sloppy and not to have much depth. Charles Wesley’s hymns have both.

**Examples of ‘modern’ hymns:** are legion, and I wouldn’t really know where to start. It’s a little frustrating to learn a new hymn, only to find that it’s been dropped when we have a new hymnbook! And ‘modern’ isn’t quite the same as ‘contemporary’. The only thing I would say about modern or contemporary hymns is that the best ones allow congregations to sing them. There’s sometimes the danger that a band or a group or a soloist perform before a congregation who become more of a listening audience and less of a participating group of worshippers. This is why I personally choose hymns from Iona (especially those of John Bell and Graham Maule), and have grown to love those written by Bernadette Farrell, Alan Gaunt, our own Fred Pratt Green, Graham Kendrick, Fred Khan, Shirley Murray, Herman Stuempfle, Stuart Townend and Brian Wren.

### **(3) Finally, *Singing the Faith* is **AN INTERNATIONAL HYMNBOOK****

We have a hymnbook that not only crosses denominational boundaries and spans the centuries; it overleaps *national* frontiers, too. Look at the hymn writers and see if you can find anything about them – and if you look at the top of the page, you’ll often be able to tell in which language the hymn was originally written, and sometimes the person who translated it into English is listed at the bottom, alongside the author.

But we don’t ask for the author’s passport! It’s quite ironic to think that when VE Day was celebrated in the Spring of 1945, and people up and down the country gathered to sing **StF 81 *Now thank we all our God***, they were singing a hymn translated from the German – Martin Rinkart (1586-1649), who became an archdeacon in Saxony, and to a German tune – “*Nun Danket*” by Johann Crüger (1598-1662), who wrote a book entitled ‘The Practice of Piety through Music’. In successive hymnbooks there is an increasing number of hymns from all over the world, and though we need to be reminded that there are 80 million *Methodists* in 80 different countries, there are hymns in *Singing the Faith* from a much wider storehouse.

To give just a few examples (and there are many more that you’ll find or know already):

#### **EUROPE:**

There are **German** favourites like **StF 130 *We plough the fields and scatter***, or **StF 368 *When morning gilds the skies***, or at Christmas – Joseph Mohr’s **StF 217 *Silent night, holy night***. To a lesser degree we have hymns translated from the **French**: one that we should sing every Easter Sunday: **StF 313 *Thine be the glory, Risen, conquering Son***, which we sing to Handel’s great tune from his oratorio *Judas Maccabaeus*. And also at Easter, we now sing **StF 306 *Now the green blade rises*** to a lovely French tune, ‘Noel Nouvelet’.

Two **Italian** hymns come to mind: **StF 99 All creatures of our God and King**, (by St Francis) and one of the loveliest (and oldest) hymns that we sing at Pentecost: **StF 372 Come down, O Love divine**. And there are many more, such as a lovely little hymn from Latvia **StF 694 By the Babylonian rivers**. You'll understand my own particular fondness for **Welsh hymns** – but I've conducted a service based entirely around a selection of them, so will merely mention that there is a rich treasure-house waiting to be explored, and leave it at that!

But one thing I have noticed with *Hymns & Psalms*, which appeared in 1983 and which I used for virtually my entire ministry, and then *Singing the Faith* which came to us in 2013, is that the net has been thrown wider and wider with successive books – and rightly so. Whilst our worship is enriched by our Christian brothers and sisters in Europe, there are many more hymns from Africa, Asia and South America, than ever before – and I give you just a few examples:-

#### **SOUTH AMERICA:**

Have a look in the '**liturgical Settings**' section towards the back of the book, and you'll find some interesting material. One little gem is **StF 761 Merciful Lord, in your loving-kindness, hear our prayer, listen to our intercession** by Simeio Monteiro, a Brazilian Methodist with whom I've worked, because he translated one of my books (*Brother Charles*) into Portuguese.

Also from **South America** is **StF 485 When we are living, we are in the Lord** from Mexico, translated from the Spanish by John Bell – who, with Graham Maule, has given us many fine modern hymns in the Iona tradition – and two newcomers, **St 42 O sing to the Lord, O sing God a new song** from Brazil, and a hymn by Timothy Dudley-Smith (1926- ) but set to a Chilean folk melody - **StF 43 Come, let us praise the Lord**.

#### **ASIA:**

I was sorry that **H&P 518 Father God in heaven** was dropped. It was a beautiful paraphrase of the Lord's Prayer, by a Sri Lankan Methodist called Daniel Niles (1908-1970), who set it to a Chinese melody composed by Hu Te-ai. But the lovely **Father in heaven (StF 4)** by the same author, and set to 'Halad', a Philippine folk melody, has been thankfully kept! Maybe one day we'll see the return of **H&P 539 One who is all unfit to count** – written by an Indian Christian: Narayan Vaman Tilak (1862-1919) who had been converted from Hinduism, when an English missionary friend asked his permission to translate it from the Marathi language. But try **StF 771 May the love of the Lord rest upon your soul** which is actually translated from the German but is set to a tune by Swee Hong Lim, an eminent Singaporean; also **StF 291 'Why has God forsaken me?'** written by an American but set to a tune by a Japanese composer, Taihei Sato.

#### **AFRICA:**

Then from **Africa**, there are many memorable additions:- a number from South Africa can be found in the 'Liturgical settings' section at the back of **STF**; the lovely, gentle **StF 145 Night has fallen**; the stirring **StF 483 We are marching in the light of God**, from South Africa; and the wonderful Easter hymn from the pen of Bernard Kyamanywa – **StF 304 Jesus is risen, alleluia!** And there are many, many more.

So forgive me for concluding this rather long article with some words of Charles Wesley which could equally apply to *Singing the Faith*: 'Such a Hymn-Book you have now before you. It is not so large as to be either cumbersome or expensive; and it is large enough to contain such a variety of hymns as will not soon be worn threadbare. It is large enough to contain all the important truths of our most holy religion . . . the hymns are not carelessly jumbled together, but carefully ranged under proper heads, according to the experience of real Christians . . . I would commend it to every truly pious reader, as a means of raising or quickening the spirit of devotion.'



**A Prayer:** Gracious God, thank you for the richness and variety that our hymns give us. Help us to celebrate and cherish the diversity that are contained in our hymnbooks like *Singing the Faith*, that through the words we read and sing, we may bring others closer to you in 'wonder, love and praise', though Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

*Barrie Tabraham*