

WORK ON THE 1911 LUTHERAN HYMNAL AS REPORTED BY THE NORTHWESTERN LUTHERAN

Mark T. Kipfmiller

Senior Church History
Prof. Fredrich
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WORK ON THE 1941 LUTHERAN HYMNAL AS REPORTED BY THE NORTHWESTERN LUTHERAN

In a few years we will once again be faced with the opportunity and sometimes aggravating work of accommodating ourselves to a new hymnal. Those years are still before us. Currently, however, a committee is busy at work, taking initial steps of preparation for ^a yet-to-be-released hymnal. If one picks up a copy of a recent Northwestern Lutheran, one can read comments and opinions from many sources regarding the wisdom or foolishness of introducing a new hymnal in the Wisconsin Synod. Unfortunately, however, the issues of the Northwestern Lutheran published during the 1930's do not contain letters from readers who were ready and willing to vent their anger or frustration. But the issues of the Northwestern Lutheran (particularly those published during the fourth decade of this century) do furnish us with an interesting look at how our synod participated in the work of a new hymnal and how the joint-synodical Committee on Hymnology went about their business. It is my hope that this paper will give us a better idea of how our Wisconsin Synod participated in the 1941 hymnal project and also how this information was reported to Wisconsin Synod people by The Northwestern Lutheran.

In the "lead article" of the July 13, 1941 issue of The Northwestern Lutheran, an announcement was made concerning the new Lutheran Hymnal. This announcement consisted of the happy news that the new hymnal was finally off the presses and was already being distributed.¹ This article also noted the widespread attention and demand which this long-expected hymnal had generated: nearly a half-million copies had already been ordered before its publication in July of 1941. It was almost exactly 15 years earlier that an announcement was placed in The Northwestern which probably generated little excitement or attention. That announcement of 1926 stated

the desire of the joint synods to have a Committee on Publications "prepare such additions to the present edition of the Book of Hymns as seem to be needed."² Originally no new book was planned and, in fact, the Synodical Conference seemed to have been quite content to publish a new edition of the Book of Hymns with certain additional hymns and liturgical responses. The Northwestern of 1926 further noted that anyone who wanted to suggest possible additions or corrections to the present Book of Hymns could write Rev. H. Koller Moussa of Fond du Lac before October 15 of 1926.³

In 1929, it appears as though the Synodical Conference was still determined to publish only a new edition of the old Book of Hymns. Rev. Moussa had died by this year and Professor August Pieper seems to have been given the temporary duty of keeping our synod up to date on this hymnal project. Apparently Prof. Pieper wanted the work on suggestions to a revised hymnal completed as quickly as possible by his Wisconsin Synod before the various synods would convene their respective conferences later in the year. And so he requested that pastors and teachers of the Wisconsin Synod send in "one or more" of those hymns which they thought would be appropriate for adding to the Book of Hymns.⁴

When the delegate convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio and Other States met at River Forest, IL. in 1929, it authorized a revision of the Evangelical Lutheran Hymn-Book of 1912. Apparently such a "revision" included the very real possibility that it might (and probably would) become a new book in and of itself. The convention at River Forest also stipulated that sister synods of the Synodical Conference be asked to cooperate in such a hymnal project. Apparently it didn't take long to realize a new hymn book was needed by the Synodical Conference since, in The Northwestern Lutheran of 1930, a publication date

of 1939 had already been set for the new book. Also recognized was the need for deliberate and careful action on the part of the hymn book committees, particularly since, in The Northwestern's words, "our present hymnals will answer their purpose for quite a number of years."⁵

At Missouri's synodical conference, Dr. F. Pfotenhauer appointed the following Missouri Synod individuals to a Hymnbook Committee: Professor W. Polack (the chairman of both this committee and the intersynodical committee), Professor L. Fuerbringer, Rev. O. Kaiser, Professor L. Blankenbuehler and Mr. B. Schumacher. This Missouri Synod committee held an organizational meeting in St. Louis on Nov. 20, 1929. At the same time, Pres. Bergemann of the Wisconsin Synod appointed Professor John P. Meyer and Rev. O. Hagedorn to head up Wisconsin's "Committee on Hymnology and Liturgics."⁶ Finally, on Jan. 3, 1930, the Intersynodical Committee organized for a meeting in Milwaukee. At this time, Prof. Polack received the chairman's position and Mr. Schumacher was appointed secretary of this intersynodical gathering. (It's interesting to note that Prof. Polack always undersigned any reports in The Northwestern, reports which we might think to be the responsibility of the secretary). In addition to the Missouri and Wisconsin Synods, the following men were also present at the Milwaukee meeting: Rev. N. Madson and Rev. C. Anderson of the Norwegian Synod and Rev. J. Pelikan of the Slovak Synod.⁷

Why had the plan to only revise the original Book of Hymns been scrapped? The Northwestern is relatively silent on this point but it does give us a few pieces of information. Apparently the request for suggested changes went relatively unheeded throughout the Synod. And when a pastor or teacher did respond with a suggested change, the original committee decided that "none of the proposed alterations or additions are highly essential

or urgent."⁸ The original committee decided that the proposed changes could only be carried out in a kind of "patchwork" way and consequently, really needn't be carried out at all. In the meantime, The Northwestern Lutheran advised its readers to continue purchasing the Book of Hymns since it would be some time before a new hymnal appeared.⁹

The Intersynodical Committee on Hymnology proceeded to carry out its assigned task. In 1933, the reports on accepted hymns and tunes began to appear in The Northwestern. The Committee decided not to print all of the accepted hymns, only those hymns which were altered in some respect, were a new translation or a completely new hymn. Quite a few of the hymns adopted for the new book were unchanged, left in the same form as that which appeared in the 1912 book. During the next four years, The Northwestern continued to publish 6 or 7 hymns in each issue, hymns which in some way were changed or revised by the Committee.

What standards did the Committee use when evaluating hymns for the new book? The Committee used this principle when evaluating hymns: They had to be of "intrinsic value as to content and must be distinctively Christian."¹⁰ Translations had to be in fluent, idiomatic English and also had to be a faithful rendering of the original text.¹¹ The tunes accompanying the selected hymns had to be suited to the text and had to be "good church music," the Committee itself deciding what was good and what wasn't.¹²

The Committee studied many different kinds of hymns. It acquainted itself not only with the older German hymns but also some English and American hymns which normally did not make their way into a hymnbook used by those of German heritage. The Committee also reacquainted itself with hymns of ancient and medieval origin and also looked at the music of these hymns.¹³

The Committee certainly displayed no particular bias against any hymn of a denomination if it might prove useful. They eventually used some stanzas from Stark's Prayer Book and from the American Lutheran hymnal, The Common Service Book.¹¹

During these musically formative years, The Northwestern Lutheran recognized the value of educating its readers anew in the area of hymnology and liturgics. It's natural to assume that during this time the magazine would print more articles about hymns and about the heritage of hymnody which we as Lutherans enjoy. While the reports of the Committee's ongoing work might have become rather tedious reading, The Northwestern attempted to supplement these reports with educational material and some type of response from the ministerial field.

During 1940, a series entitled "Newcomers to The Hymnal" attempted to give readers an interesting look at the background of certain hymns and writers. One particular section detailed "great hymns inspired by affliction" while another section was devoted to travel hymns.¹⁵ Perhaps the most extensive series was that written by Pastor Gervasius W. Fischer of Peshtigo, Wisconsin. It was entitled "Introducing the Liturgical Part of The New Hymnal." In his first article, Pastor Fischer reminded his readers that one of the fruits of faith is that of worshipping God.¹⁶ The new hymnal would aid the reader in that specific area of sanctification. Pastor Fischer ended the first article of his series with an expression of hope that the new hymnal would not only meet the needs of public worshippers but also would meet the private devotional needs of many Christians. Such a hope and such an importance placed on private devotional time is a note which all ages need to hear.

In subsequent articles, Pastor Fischer noted the necessity of public

worship both for building up individual Christians and congregations and also for confessing Jesus' name before the world.¹⁷ Fischer also noted how careful one should be not to confuse people with a new order of service. He writes in The Northwestern: "Great care must be further exercised that changes in the existing order of services in a congregation not be made without first instructing the congregation as to the meaning and the purpose of such changes."¹⁸ Pastor Fischer also maintained that "our hymns and all parts of the service must not only contain Gospel but must have the Gospel as their center."¹⁹

Gervasius Fischer's articles are also worth a person's attention because of certain historical and social commentary which they contain. In one of his more interesting articles, Fischer wrote of the way the church service used to be explained so that confusion would not arise among churchgoers. Not only did parents teach their children parts of the liturgy, Fischer notes, but they also insisted that their children know the Gospel selections for every Sunday.²⁰ In fact, he tells us, it was customary in some countries that the entire service for the following Sunday was studied in classrooms every Friday. In keeping with this custom, Pastor Fischer recommended that current and future churchgoers read the appropriate Introit, Epistle, Gospel and Offertory before every service so that "each member can join wholeheartedly in public worship."²¹

I found Fischer's commentary on his times to be the most interesting part of his series. In the ninth part of his series, Fischer wrote about "externalism." He was alarmed to a certain extent over the tendency toward making the divine service more of an outward show than an internal act of devotion. In this connection, Fischer feared that "when our new hymnal appears, we might sooner or later think of the liturgies printed there

as the only correct ones and by and by judge the orthodoxy of a church by the 'correctness' of its liturgical forms."²² Fischer then proceeds to note the affect of his materialistic age on the people of that day. "The radio has finished the job for externalism by supplying us music... without the least effort on our part."²³ And Pastor Fischer also observed that the farmer "while milking his cows no longer has time for serious thought because the radio is occupying him with news, music and entertainment."²⁴ Pastor Fischer certainly appreciated a service with outward beauty -- he simply wanted to see a certain amount of balance between inward and outward devotion while keeping both centered on the most essential element, the Word of God and what God says to us through it.

Although their views were relatively unexpressed, we occasionally are able to see in The Northwestern what opinions were held by some of the laity and ministers and teachers of the day. Already, in a 1926 issue, one person expressed the desire to see organists making a sizable contribution to a new hymnal.²⁵ In a 1930 editorial, Kurt F. Oswald expressed in print his question, "What is Good Church Music?" The ultimate defining point of "good" church music, according to Oswald, is its preaching of the Gospel. All else takes a back seat.²⁶

In another 1930 editorial, a writer wrote about and decried sentimental hymns. It's interesting to note that some of the hymns he criticized eventually made their way into the present hymnal and, in fact, have become favorites of many. One hymn which was panned by the writer was the "Wesleyan" "Jesus, Lover of My Soul." The writer also said that "My Faith Looks Up To Thee" contained words which were "hardly the cry of a Christian confident in death."²⁷ In this connection, the writer defends German hymns as truly spiritual and expresses a slight bias when he claimed

that "no translation from German can do justice to hymns..."²⁸ The writer hoped that the new hymnal would contain translations of people who could enter into the spirit of German Lutheran hymns and provide a suitable translation. A German bias also seems to surround the thoughts of this writer of 1933: "Deprive our hymns of their historic musical setting, sing them to a newer, modern tune and you have deprived the rose of the fragrance she alone possesses, you have robbed the nightingale of her most rapturous note."²⁹

In the March 27, 1938 issue of The Northwestern, notice was given to the readers that the reports of the Hymnbook Committee would not appear in the future. Throughout 1936 and 1937, The Northwestern faithfully provided its readers with reports of hymns which had been accepted and, as noted earlier, had been altered in some respect. But now, as Rev. Arthur Voss noted, the work of the Hymnbook Committee was rapidly nearing the completion of the first draft of hymns.³⁰ In retrospect, the published hymn reports kept the people of the Synod informed to a certain extent, but they hardly caused an outpouring of response in any form. Voss writes: "Your committee is very sorry to say that very few pastors of our Synod have shown any interest in the new hymn book."³¹ The Missouri Synod appears to have experienced an opposite reaction. In The Lutheran Witness, Prof. Polack said he was deeply gratified at the fine response elicited by the Missouri Synod. He tells us that many letters came in from lay men and women which showed that the members had a fine sense of what hymnody is about.³²

By 1938, many changes had taken place in the committees of the different synods. Professor Fuerbringer had tendered his resignation in 1931 because of his increasing duties as President of the Seminary in

St. Louis. Rev. Wm. Moll of Fort Wayne was appointed to take his place. Prof. John Meyer of the Wisconsin Synod had also resigned and was replaced by Prof. A. Zich who in turn was replaced by Rev. W. J. Schaefer when Prof. Zich died. The other Wisconsin Synod committee member, Rev. Hagedorn, died in 1932 and was replaced by the aforementioned Rev. Voss.³³

In the June 18, 1939 issue of The Northwestern, an appeal was made to the pastors and teachers of the Wisconsin Synod to examine a "provisional" copy of the future hymnal.³⁴ This prospectus, which contained 80 pages of hymn listings, was sent to each pastor and teacher in the hope that they would respond by August 1 with any recommendations or comments they had. The response was much better this time, even forcing the Committee to extend its deadline until October 1st of that year.³⁵

After reviewing responses and comments from the members of each synod, the Intersynodical Committee turned over the finished manuscript of the future hymnal to Concordia Publishing House in April of 1940. Polack told his readers that the Publishing House "painstakingly followed" the suggestions which the Committee had made about the style of type, arrangement of pages, paper and binding.³⁶ An analysis of the submitted manuscript shows that 37% of the adopted hymns were German and 33% were of English origin.³⁷ There would only be 380 different tunes, 313 original hymns and 347 translations, the majority of which were from German.³⁸ While not ignoring the excellent tunes which came down to us from English composers, The Hymnbook Committee exercised great care to give the Lutheran chorale its proper place. Prof. Polack tells us that the Committee even "resurrected from the dust of the centuries" some German chorales as a result of diligent research which had been carried out.³⁹

In the meantime, The Northwestern Lutheran attempted to keep its readers as up to date as possible about a possible market date for the new hymnal. Although the Hymnbook Committee had hoped that the musical compositor could set 30 hymns a week so that the book could be on the market in December of 1940, The Northwestern noted a delay with this announcement: "At present we are no longer making any predictions, except that we are hoping that there will be no unnecessary delays."⁴⁰ The musical compositor was located in Chicago and the musical score and text were set by hand there. After setting the hymns, proofs were sent to Committee members who gave them a final O. K.⁴¹ One can understand the time involved in sending these composites to their various checkpoints.

But The Northwestern could furnish its readers with some definite details about the long-expected book. Its title would be The Lutheran Hymnal, calculated to consist of 804 pages. It would be "bound in blue cloth of good texture and chemically impregnated so as to make it almost water proof and vermine proof."⁴² The suggested list price would be \$1.35, selling at a wholesale price of \$1.08. In regard to this estimated price, the Committee and Publishing House thought the cost was so reasonable that every pew, school desk and home should have one.⁴³ The hope was expressed that "our people will never demand any other (hymnal) so that we will have only one hymnal."⁴⁴

The Concordia Publishing House certainly made every effort to arouse synodical response to this new book. A lowered introductory price of 81 cents was maintained until May 24, 1941. This low price was also offered as an inducement for congregations to replace their old 1912 hymn books with the new version. Any congregation could order any number of hymnals for 81 cents on the declaration that an equivalent number of older hymnals

were in turn being replaced.⁴⁵ Once a discount price was obtained for a certain number of new hymnals when the older books were replaced, a stipulation was attached that the replaced books not be used again by another church or mission to get another discount.⁴⁶ The Publishing House in St. Louis decided to continue to offer the 1912 hymn book until it was no longer demanded.

The congregations and members of the Wisconsin Synod were invited to send in their orders for the new hymnal as soon as possible and those orders would be honored once the book was published. The initial response of the synods was certainly overwhelming. By November 3 of 1940, the first edition of 50,000 copies was already oversold even though the new hymnal would not yet be published until over a half-year later.⁴⁷ Such a dramatic response to the new hymnal was in part brought about by the desire of clubs and societies in synodical congregations to provide an entire set of new hymnals for their respective churches. Other individuals would often place books as memorials. "One pastor recently reported that every book in his pews will be a memorial to some departed relative or friend of his people."⁴⁸ (Concordia Publishing House had also by this time prepared memorial announcements for placement on the inside of the front cover of the new hymnals).

When the July 13, 1941 issue of The Northwestern Lutheran rolled off the presses, the new Lutheran Hymnal was already being sent out to those congregations and individuals who had placed their orders the year before. The Intersynodical Hymnbook Committee prayed for its acceptance by the people. A final Committee report noted that "the fond hope of having one hymnal for the churches of this body has been realized, giving us another manifestation of the unity of faith."⁴⁹ Prof. Polack observed

the finished product with a certain amount of well-deserved pride:

Thus The Lutheran Hymnal on which the editorial committee spent nearly eleven years of work goes forth into the churches, schools and homes of the Synodical Conference with the fervent prayer of the committee that it may serve to the greater glory of the Triune God and to the constant edification of God's children.⁵⁰

The Editorial Committee of this hymnal project continued to carry out other assignments which had been delegated to it. Additional work included devotions and prayer books. The Committee also was faced with the project of revising the Agenda so that it would harmonize with the new hymnal. They also expressed a desire to issue a companion volume to the hymnal which would contain hymns for special occasions not covered in the recently published hymnal.⁵¹ The Committee had also planned to include in the hymnal an index of Bible texts, authors, composers, original first lines and topics but they finally decided that such an index would make the hymnal too bulky, choosing instead to publish a companion volume -- The Handbook to The Lutheran Hymnal.⁵²

When one reflects on the "new" hymnal which was presented to the people of the Intersynodical Conference, the cooperation of the various synods in compiling this book is quite apparent. The overwhelming response of the people to this hymnal shows that it was certainly needed. One can only hope that our Synod will respond in like manner to the hymnal which in a few years will take the place of the present Lutheran Hymnal. The Northwestern Lutheran of the 1930's and early 1940's presents us with a good picture of how one generation sought to make their new hymnal as well-organized and well-received as possible. Throughout the ages, Christian people continually seek to express their faith in new and better ways as well as retaining the ways of old which need no refinement or replace-

ment. While we await a new hymnal, The Northwestern Lutheran of July 13, 1941 still gives us some good advice: "Many Christians, young and old, cannot find words to profess their faith. Turn to The Lutheran Hymnal for a clear and forceful profession of our faith!"⁵³

Mark T. Kipfmiller

NOTES

¹"The Motto of The Lutheran Hymnal," The Northwestern Lutheran, July 13, 1941, p. 210.

²H. Koller Moussa, "Addenda to the Book of Hymns," The Northwestern Lutheran, August 18, 1926, p. 252.

³Ibid.

⁴August Pieper, "Concerning Our English Hymnal," TNL, March 17, 1929, p. 94.

⁵O. Hagedorn, "Concerning Our English Hymnal," TNL, February, 16, 1930, p. 55.

⁶Ibid.

⁷W. G. Polack, "The Lutheran Hymnal," TNL, May 18, 1941, p. 154.

⁸O. Hagedorn, p. 55.

⁹O. Hagedorn, p. 55.

¹⁰Polack, "The Lutheran Hymnal," p. 155.

¹¹"Committee on Hymnology and Liturgics," TNL, January 7, 1934, p. 10.

¹²Polack, "The Lutheran Hymnal," p. 155.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴W. G. Polack, "Report of Committee on Hymnology and Liturgics," TNL, October 22, 1933, p. 342.

¹⁵Ivan H. Hagedorn, "Great Hymns Inspired by Affliction," TNL, March 24, 1940, pp. 86-7.

¹⁶Gervasius Fischer, "Introducing the Liturgical Part of the New Hymnal," Part One, TNL, September 8, 1940, p. 280.

¹⁷Fischer, Part Two, October 20, 1940, p. 327.

¹⁸Fischer, Part Three, November 3, 1940, p. 347.

¹⁹Fischer, Part Four, December 1, 1940, p. 378.

²⁰Fischer, Part Five, December 15, 1940, p. 393.

²¹Ibid.

²²Fischer, Part Nine, April 20, 1941, p. 118.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Ibid.

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- 25 H. Koller Moussa, "Second Notice," TNL, September 5, 1926. p. 286.
- 26 Kurt F. Oswald, "What is Good Church Music?" TNL, January 19, 1930,
p. 25.
- 27 "Sickly Sentimental Hymns," TNL, March 16, 1930, p. 84.
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 The Evangelist, "Singing Faith," TNL, May 7, 1933, p. 152.
- 30 "Hymn Book Committee Report," TNL, February 27, 1938, p. 72.
- 31 Ibid.
- 33 Polack, "The Lutheran Hymnal," p. 154.
- 32 Polack, "Report of the Committee on Hymnology and Liturgics,"
The Lutheran Witness, March 27, 1934, p. 133.
- 34 "The New English Hymn Book," TNL, June 18, 1939, p. 206.
- 35 Polack, "Notice," TNL, September 10, 1939, p. 302.
- 36 Polack, "The Lutheran Hymnal," p. 155.
- 37 "The New Hymnal," TNL, November 19, 1939, p. 378.
- 38 Polack, "The Lutheran Hymnal," p. 155.
- 39 Polack, "The Lutheran Hymnal," p. 156.
- 40 Polack, "The New Hymnal," TNL, November 3, 1940, p. 347.
- 41 Ibid.
- 42 "The New English Hymnal," TNL, July 28, 1940, p. 237.
- 43 Polack, "The New Hymnal," p. 348.
- 44 Ibid.
- 45 "The New English Hymnal," p. 237.
- 46 Ibid.
- 47 Polack, "The New Hymnal," p. p. 348.
- 48 Ibid.
- 49 Polack, "The Lutheran Hymnal," p. 154.
- 50 Polack, "The Lutheran Hymnal," p. 156.

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⁵¹Polack, "Report of the Committee on Hymnology and Liturgics, "
TNL, April 20, 1941, p. 125.

⁵²Polack, "The Lutheran Hymnal," p. 155.

⁵³"The Motto of The Lutheran Hymnal," p. 211.

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