

A History of Hymnal Changeovers in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod

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At first glance, the reader might have some questions as to why a subject like this one is even worthy of interest. Why should we care about the history of the Wisconsin Synod's changeovers in respect to hymnody when the Wisconsin Synod is generally pretty unified in its usage of *The Lutheran Hymnal*, published in 1941? However, since August, 1981, this subject has become important for the members of our church body. For it was at that time that the WELS Committee on Hymnody and Liturgics presented a report to the Synod convention, indicating that a change of hymnals is imminent for the Wisconsin Synod. If this church body wants to remain faithful to its Lutheran heritage as it begins the necessary steps to change its hymnal once again, it then becomes crucial for us to examine the changes that have already taken place in this Synod. We must see what, if any, mistakes were made in the past changeovers so that these will not be repeated, and we must examine also what was done right in the past so that we may succeed in our future endeavors. Let us look then at the past hymnal changes in our Wisconsin Synod to find out why each change took place, how it came about, what changes were made, and finally what results were affected by each change.

Before we discuss the first change (which would take place in 1870), let us first discuss the status quo at the beginning of the Synod's history. What kind of hymnody and hymnals did early Wisconsin Synod Lutherans possess? This certainly is not an easy question to answer for a few reasons. Early accounts of Wisconsin Synod activities in the area of hymnody, and in all musical areas for that matter, are very sketchy, chiefly because the Wisconsin Synod had no official paper or periodical in those early years. Because most early Wisconsin Synod members were immigrants from Germany, it seems natural that they would bring their native hymnbooks along with them. In this matter of immigration, Wisconsin Synod history is quite different from that of the Missouri Synod. While early Missouri Synod Lutherans moved to America from Saxony as a group and organized congregations as a group, Wisconsin Synod Lutherans came as individuals, families, and small groups to live in Wisconsin. Although they came from different parts of Germany, once they began to live in a general vicinity they joined forces and organized Lutheran congregations here. Since they were from various parts of Germany, the German hymnals which they either brought with them or ordered from Germany must have been quite varied.¹

However, German hymnals cannot have been the only kind used by early Wisconsin Synod Lutherans. The fact that the *Proceedings of the Synodical Convention*, held in 1865, includes a recommendation to "negotiate with the Hon. Synods of Pennsylvania, New York, and Ohio concerning improvements of the Pennsylvania Gesangbuch"² would seem to indicate that also this Pennsylvania hymnal was being widely used at this time. Consequently, we see that early Wisconsin Synod congregations were not very unified in the hymnals that they employed for their worship services.

The first reason that the Synod needed to make its first change in hymnals should be obvious after examining the status quo of that time. There was no unity in the Synod in respect to its hymnal usage. One can imagine how difficult it must have been for a visitor in one of our early congregations to sing hymns which his own congregation never sang. Our Synod needed some uniformity.

¹ For further evidence that there were more than one German hymnal used among WELS churches in the Synod's first twenty years of history, see "A Brief History of Hymnals Used in WELS Congregations," *The Lutheran Educator*, Vol. XXII, Feb., 1982, No. 3, pp. 8-10.

² *Verhandlungen der 15. Versammlung der deutschen Evangel.-Luther. Synode von Wisconsin und andere Staaten, 22 bis 28 Juni, 1865.*

Another reason, even more crucial, why a change needed to take place is because of the doctrinal aberrations in the Pennsylvania Lutheran hymnal. After the 1869 convention, when our Synod decided to publish its own improvement of this hymnal, Reverend Th. Jäckel condemned the Pennsylvania hymnal as it then existed, saying that many of its hymns were anti-Lutheran.³ This fact showed members of the Synod that the use of such hymns in their worship service was not permissible according to the Synod's Constitution of 1863, Ch. 4, paragraph 45, which says,

45. Since the synod is only an advisory body, each congregation has the right to set up its own manner of taking care of its internal and external affairs, especially in regard... to the order of the church service, etc., however the last mentioned as well as anything connected with it cannot be contrary to the doctrine and practice of the Evangelical Lutheran Church.

We can see then that even in the area of hymnody our early Wisconsin Synod members were concerned about doctrinal orthodoxy. Hymns were to be sung to the glory of God and the edification of man, just like other parts of the worship service. Our Synod needed a hymnbook that was doctrinally pure.

Information about the early events in the hymnal changeover (which would occur in 1870) is lacking. However, in 1865, the *Proceedings of the Synodical Convention* does record for us some recommendations by a committee which apparently had been formed to report on the matter of a hymnal for the Synod. Following are the proposals:

1. The officials of his Hon. Synod negotiate with the Hon. Synods of Pennsylvania, New York, and Ohio concerning improvements of the Pennsylvania *Gesangbuch*;
2. in case the negotiations prove unsuccessful, the improvements, suggested by the Synod, be taken up by its own committee;
3. the improvements, etc., be incorporated in such a manner, that the old edition of the Pennsylvania *Gesangbuch* could be used along with the new hymnal;
4. the committee must submit its changes according to the advice of the individual conferences;
5. that the individual conferences turn in their proposals of rejection or acceptance of individual hymns to the committee.

One change worthy of note before the report was made into a motion and passed is the amendment of point three so that it read "to restore all original texts, and to replace the weak hymns with the good old choice hymns." The Synod then decided to take final action of the printing of a hymnal at the next convention.

At the convention in 1866⁴ the committee brought in more proposals. Following is a summary of them:

1. that it would be better to publish a new hymnal together with the future General Synod, but to proceed under the prevailing conditions with the revision of the Pennsylvania hymnal, and to retain the old committee;
2. that the original texts be re-instituted, but that the revisions be made as sparingly as possible with regard to the change of texts;
3. that, with the deletion of hymns from the old hymnal a) several of Gellert's hymns be retained, b) that old select hymns of our church be especially considered, but that new ones should not be excluded, c) that certain types of hymn classifications be combined under a larger heading, d) that the number of mission hymns and marriage hymns be increased, and that rain-hymns and storm-hymns be added, e)

³ *Gemeindeblatt*, Feb. 1, 1870, pp. 1-2.

⁴ *Verhandlungen der 16. Versammlung*, 1866.

that one hundred thirty-five hymns of the old hymnal be replaced, and that forty select hymns be added to the new hymnal, f) that the best hymns of those suggested by the former committee be selected and included, and g) that about two dozen prayers be included in a supplement;

4. that suggestions concerning the revision of the hymnal be made as soon as possible, and that these suggestions be laid before the delegates of the various synods at the next convention, and also before the various conferences of our own synod.

The main reason, it was stated, that the work should be done with the other synod, was because our Synod was small and poor. However, no motion was passed in regard to these proposals; probably, the matter was returned to the committee.

During the winter of the same year, a convention of representatives from the various Evangelical Lutheran Synods of America was held in Reading, Pennsylvania. There a committee was appointed which would consist of one member of each synod. This committee was supposed to prepare a German hymnal and report to the next convention. The work already completed by the Wisconsin and Ohio Synods was to be recognized.⁵

The year 1867 saw our Synod still without a hymnal. At our convention it was once again decided to "wait and see" what would happen at the next convention of the joint synods. At Fort Wayne, Indiana, the same synods met again that year, at which time the publishing of a hymnal was affirmatively voted upon. However, for various reasons this resolution was never carried out. Theological disputes began affecting the work on the hymnal, and once again the matter of publishing a new American hymnal in the German language was delayed. The Wisconsin Synod's 1868 convention saw the same result--more waiting to see what would happen with the General Council.

By the time 1869 rolled around, our Synod was tired of waiting. Three main resolutions were voted through: 1) that we begin immediately with our own publication of the improved hymnal; 2) that our committee be asked to complete its work; and 3) that the Synod effect a contract with the publisher George Brumder, a local Milwaukee printer and brother-in-law of past Synod president Streissguth.

Once things began rolling, it didn't take much time before the new hymnal was on the market. The May 15, 1870 issue of *Gemeindeblatt*⁶ announced that the hymnals were ready to be sold. The title of the new Synod hymnal was *Evang.-Lutherisches Gesangbuch*. It contained 695 hymns, about ninety per cent of which were identical with the Missouri Synod's hymnal at that time, the *Kirchengesangbuch*. Rev. Th. Jäckel had announced in February of 1870 in the *Gemeindeblatt*⁷ that the hymn numbers agreed with those of the Pennsylvania hymnal, whenever the words were the same.

Did the new hymnal bring results? It certainly did, although the results were certainly not expected. Instead of being pleased with its first hymnal, many Wisconsin Synod pastors were disappointed and definitely not satisfied. In fact, we could say that the main result of our Synod's first hymnal was to cause so many objections that the Synod's next change in hymnals was ordered.

⁵ *Proceedings of the Convention* held by Representatives from the various Evangelical Lutheran Synods in the United States and Canada, accepting the Unaltered Augsburg Confession, at Reading, Pa., Dec. 12-14, 1866.

⁶ *Gemeindeblatt*, May 15, 1870, p. 4.

⁷ *Ibid.*, Feb. 1, 1870, pp. 1-2.

The first hymnal had only been on the market for a number of weeks before complaints were flying. These were discussed at the June convention of the Synod that same year.⁸ Several pastors expressed opinions that certain hymns that had been included should not have been used because of the false doctrines they either contained or implied. This is the main reason why the Synod changed its hymnal so quickly.

Once the numerous objections were voiced the Synod acted quickly. A committee was appointed at that same convention to seek out the doctrinally bad hymns and replace them with better ones. The Synod also decided that these new hymns should be published in pamphlet form and be inserted into the hymnals that had already come off the presses. Finally, the Synod voted that two of the hymns would have to be rejected because of their anti-Scriptural doctrines.

The new committee also acted quickly to repair the damages inflicted on our hymnal. It soon made an exhaustive examination of the controversial hymns, and the very next month announced its changes. The July issue of *Gemeindeblatt*⁹ announced that nine hymns (Nos. 50, 57, 68, 232, 253, 292, 479, 489, 490) had been rejected in the first hymnal and replaced in the second; also, the eleventh stanza of hymn 43 had been altered. Only two months later the publication of the approved hymnal was announced.¹⁰ And only two years later the new *Evang.-Lutherische Gesangbuch* was copyrighted (1872).

Although in reality this was the Synod's second hymnal, this *Gesangbuch* was the Synod's first that lasted any length of time. Like the previous one it contained 695 hymns, several prayers, a table of epistle and gospel lessons, Christ's Passion story, and the story of the destruction of Jerusalem. Unlike our hymnals today, the tunes are not included with the texts of the hymns in this hymnal. Obviously, the congregation was expected to know the tunes by heart. For the 695 hymns, 172 different tunes were suggested in this hymnal.

Apparently, this hymnal did not have the immediate effect of finding its way to every WELS congregation.¹¹ Several things might be mentioned as reasons. First of all, the Synod did not consider the use of its hymnal to be mandatory. The Constitution of 1863 has already been quoted in this paper as saying, "Since the synod is only an advisory body, each congregation has the right to set up its own...." Secondly, financial considerations might have influenced congregations' decisions. One can well imagine that if a congregation had become tired of waiting for the Synod publication and ordered a set from another source, the people would be pretty reluctant to buy the Synod's set right away, too. Finally, one might mention the fact that there are always people who are hesitant to replace the new for the old. At any rate, we find that "...by the early twentieth century, a majority of the congregations in the Wisconsin Synod had obtained and were utilizing the *Evang.-Lutherisches Gesangbuch*."¹²

The next change in hymnals that the Wisconsin Synod made cannot really be described as a "changeover" in the strictest and fullest sense of the word. More properly, it would be called an addition. However, it is important that we look at it anyway, for it helped prepare our Synod for the drastic changes that would have to be made in congregational activity once the United States entered World War I.

The need for the addition of a new hymnal was not because of dissatisfaction with the old *Gesangbuch*, at least not by traditional Wisconsin Synod members. On the contrary, it was new members of our Synod, who perhaps did not know German or were from other churches that had already adopted English as their church language,

⁸ *Verhandlungen der 20. Versammlung*, 1850.

⁹ *Gemeindeblatt*, July 15, 1870, p. 1.

¹⁰ *Gemeindeblatt*, Sept. 15, 1870, p. 4.

¹¹ James C. Grasby, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

¹² James C. Grasby, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

that needed a new hymnal. And not only new members, but even pastors and teachers were entering our Synod who felt more comfortable with English.¹³

Evidence that the Synod began to recognize the need for an English language hymnal first appears in the report of the Book Commission given at the 1910 Synod Convention.¹⁴ Among other recommendations, the Commission urged that an English hymnbook be published. Once the decision was made, the Synod acted quickly. Only one year later, in 1911, our Synod's first English hymnal was published. It was entitled *Church Hymnal*; however, no editor is indicated.

The *Church Hymnal* contained only 115 hymns. No preface was included. The index in the fore part of the book listed the hymns according to their number and gave the number of stanzas, the meter, or a suggested melody of a German chorale. This information was also printed above each hymn in the hymn section. Liturgical orders were found in the rear of the book (morning, communion, and vesper services). Also an alphabetical index of the hymns was located in the back. None of the tunes for the hymns were present in this hymnal--the organist had to use one of the eighty tunes found in the companion *Music for Church Hymnal* (a handwritten manuscript).

It is difficult to estimate the impact made by this hymnal on our Synod. Official Synod records are scanty as to just who bought the hymnal and made use of it in their worship services. However, records do tell us that after 1923 the *Church Hymnal* was no longer produced. Northwestern Publishing House records indicate that about 23,000 were published.¹⁵

However, although this hymnal may never have been widely used, and although its use may have been short-lived, a number of good results should be mentioned. First of all, it began our Synod on a venture into English language literature--an important step for an American church body founded with such solid German roots. Also, it helped our Synod to see the need of serving other sections of the American population besides just the traditional German Lutherans. Finally, it prepared our Synod for the language change that would happen almost by force when the United States would enter World War I. For it was after this country entered World War I that German Lutherans in America had to change their religious habits to avoid persecution. Suddenly English had to become the official language of the Lutheran church. Church services, congregational meetings, reports, and official periodicals had to appear in English. In most cases the German was still retained, but no longer was it the exclusive or official language of the churches.¹⁶ This change would have been much more difficult had not the Wisconsin Synod already published its first English hymnal.

It wasn't long, though, before the Synod began thinking of another switch in hymnals. Apparently, many English-speaking members who used the *Church Hymnal* were not entirely satisfied. We can only guess at what the reasons were, for evidence of complaints are lacking. However, from an article that appeared in the *Northwestern Lutheran* in 1915, we can at least make an educated guess. This article (Nov. 21, p. 176) announced that the new hymnal being planned would contain 500 or more hymns and also the music to those hymns. Perhaps the people who were using the *Church Hymnal* did not feel that they had enough variety of hymns to sing. (Remember that the *Church Hymnal* only contained 115 hymns). Perhaps they had problems with the German tunes and needed music to follow. Perhaps both--at any rate, the result was the publication of a new English language hymnal by our Synod.

¹³ James C. Grasby, "A Brief History of Hymnals Used in WELS Congregations," *The Lutheran Educator*, Vol. XXII, May, 1982, No. 4, p. 16.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

¹⁶ Arnold O. Lehmann, *The Music of the Lutheran Church, Synodical Conference, Chiefly in the Areas of Missouri, Illinois, Wisconsin and Neighboring States, 1839-1941*, p. 323.

The first indication that a new hymnal was being planned is the above-mentioned article in the *Northwestern Lutheran*. This article asked for suggestions about doctrinal, literary, musical, technical, commercial, or other considerations for a new hymnal that was in the planning stages. The chairman of the editing committee at the time was Reverend O. Hagedorn of Milwaukee. A month later the *Northwestern Lutheran* contained another article that thanked the people for their various opinions and information.

Two years later the Synod had itself a new hymnal, titled the *Book Of Hymns*. The *Northwestern Lutheran* announced its availability in its September 21, 1917 issue. It only contained 320 hymns, but the *Northwestern Lutheran* defended its small size by saying that there were "not as many as are found in other publications, but sufficient for all purposes and occasions. It is better that a congregation know a small number of hymns well than a greater number superficially."

In the May 5, 1918 issue of the *Northwestern Lutheran* (pp. 71-2) an article was written seeking suggestions for corrections for the next edition of the Synod's new *Book of Hymns*. Apparently, several errors (printing and otherwise) had been found in the first edition. This article also explained how some of the changes that were made had come about.

Yes, there were other differences between the *Church Hymnal* and the *Book of Hymns* besides just the fact that the *Book of Hymns* contained more hymns and music with its hymns. This new *Book of Hymns* contained the miscellaneous hymns first, and after them were the hymns arranged according to the liturgical church year. Not only was music added to this hymnal, but also a series of hymn numbers appeared under each tune, any of which would fit metrically with that hymn. An organist would have no trouble now choosing alternative hymn tunes for any particular hymn. The first stanza of each hymn was inserted into the score, with the other stanzas underneath.

The Synod achieved many good results with this hymnal. Finally, people didn't have to have all the tunes memorized and could sing along much better if they weren't familiar with the tune being played. The hymns were very legible and easy to read. For the most part they contained good selections, were fairly well edited and were girded toward making the Lutheran Church more conscious of its liturgical heritage.¹⁷ The *Book of Hymns* was indeed a valuable contribution to the Wisconsin Synod.

However, the Synod still had much more room for improvement in the area of hymnody. The *Book of Hymns* was not the hymnal-to-end-all-hymnals. There were weaknesses in the new hymnal that would cause our Synod to make one more changeover before the present day. Dr. Arnold O. Lehmann gives us some of the reasons why another change became necessary:

For some unexplained reason, after the English services were introduced, English hymns, not translated German chorales, became the fare of the day in the Lutheran worship services. In most cases the selections were not the hymns of the good English writers, but hymns of inferior quality. These hymns spoke of religious matters in general terms, or played upon the emotions of the individual worshipper. Some did not express basic Lutheran doctrines, while others consisted of a poor grade of poetry, and still others had tunes which were often classified as not being good music.

These hymns, in the categories just mentioned, appealed to the people because their tunes were simple melodically and harmonically. Their characteristics were very similar to the characteristics of the religious folk tune, the "spiritual song" or the Gospel hymn.... As a result

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

of the frequent use of these types of hymns, the old Lutheran chorales became less and less familiar to the Lutherans. This weaker English hymn held sway for almost the entire period..., 1920-1941.¹⁸

Apparently, the Wisconsin Synod began to realize these weaknesses early on. Already in 1926, the Book Commission of the Wisconsin Synod recommended that our Synod enter into publication of a new hymnal with other members of the Synodical Conference.¹⁹ The Missouri Synod, too, began considering a revision of their English language hymnal and in 1929 decided to ask the other members of the Synodical Conference to co-operate with them. After the other synods ratified the plan and appointed men to be members of the committee, which was organized in 1930, work on the proposed hymnal began quickly. Periodically reports and requests appeared in the various church papers, and from 1933 on, the titles of hymns according to the various sections of the new book were published in the *Northwestern Lutheran*.

April of 1939 saw the first draft of the new hymnal. An eighty page booklet was drawn up, listing all of the hymns and their tunes, and also the liturgical section contents. Copies of the booklet were sent to virtually all pastors and teachers in the Synodical Conference. A year later, in April of 1940, a completed manuscript was turned over to the Concordia Publishing House. It was titled *The Lutheran Hymnal*.

Several changes can be observed when comparing *The Lutheran Hymnal* with the Synod's previous *Book of Hymns*. Three or four stanzas of each hymn were now printed in the score, and more historical information was given with each hymn. Above the hymn on the left side was given information about the poetry, on the right side information about the tune. Certain topic or festival categories received more hymns than they had had in our previous hymnals; also a selection of carols and spiritual songs were added near the end.

The Lutheran Hymnal had several good results on our Synod in the area of hymnody. The hymnal was accepted by Wisconsin Synod congregations at an amazing speed.²⁰ It preserved for us and our children the Lutheran chorale, which, as has been indicated, had pretty generally been forgotten during the twenty years previous to its publication. The committee established by the Synodical Conference succeeded in accomplishing many of the tasks it set out to do. The hymnal was both American and Lutheran. It also resurrected some of the more or less forgotten treasures of Latin and Greek hymnody and so established ties with the ancient and medieval Christian church. The fact that it has had a great influence on our Synod is demonstrated by the fact that it has governed the musical portions of the Wisconsin Synod since its appearance. One musician calls it "the greatest musical contribution by the Synodical Conference in the first half of the twentieth century."²¹

So we have seen the changes in hymnals in the Wisconsin Synod. What then can we learn from our forefathers' successes and failures? First of all, any new change in a Wisconsin Synod hymnal will have to remain doctrinally pure--not just pre enough to please any Christian denomination, but doctrinally pure enough to represent our Lutheran teachings on Scripture. Hymnody has been used throughout our Synod's history for the glory of God and the edification of man--the texts of our hymns must always reflect this idea. As far as the music to our hymns goes, this writer feels that we must always emphasize the Lutheran chorale in our hymnals. It is the chorale that C.F.W. Walther fought so hard to re-establish in the Lutheran church, right from the beginning of its presence in America. It is the chorale that was emphasized in *The Lutheran Hymnal* of 1941. For the chorale, in this writer's opinion, is the best type of music that functions as "bearer of the Word." It does

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 324-5.

¹⁹ James C. Grasby, *op. cit.*, (May, 1982), p. 17.

²⁰ James C. Grasby, *op. cit.*, (May, 1982), p. 18.

²¹ Arnold O. Lehmann, *op. cit.*, p. 329.

not tend to emotionalism or sentimentality, nor does it call attention to itself, but it adds dignity to singing and encourages the singer to think about what he is singing rather than how it sounds. May God grant that no matter how many hymnal changes this Synod undertakes, they will always remain faithful to the God who has blessed people with the ability to sing hymns.