

Book Review

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SING THE FAITH. Louisville: Geneva Press, 2003. 256 pages.

Overview

Sing the Faith is a new compilation of congregational songs for worship, produced to meet the need in Presbyterian churches for a more varied musical offering of hymns and praise songs than their present hymnbook affords. It comes in an easy-to-handle Pew edition plus a ring-bound Accompaniment edition that needs a deep organ shelf!

In each denomination, the church must always seek to “sing a new song to the Lord,” but it must be confident that the new songs are the best that can be found. Every new song must be scrutinized in terms of its textual distinction and its musical integrity. Textually, there are new hymns, choruses, service music, Taizé chants, and a good selection of songs from the global south, especially from Africa and Latin America. In *Sing the Faith*, Presbyterians in particular will find that many of these choices add a valuable richness and variety to the offerings in their current hymnal.

Musically speaking, *Sing the Faith* makes available a broad spectrum of styles, from traditional hymns to international and ethnic hymns, music from the Taizé and Iona communities, contemporary ballads, and “praise songs.” Some of these will almost immediately find their way into worship; others will take a little more time for most congregations to welcome; and still others will remain silent notes on the printed page.

Hymns

Nearly twenty percent of the songs in the collection may be described as hymns, either because they present new or revised texts to familiar hymn tunes, or because the new texts and tunes closely resemble the traditional concept of what hymnody is.

The opening hymn in the collection is a new text by Gracia Grindal, “We Sing to You, O God,” set to the tune *Darwall’s 148th*. Even the most musically conservative congregation could pick up this strong new hymn and sing it. A rather nice descant for the sopranos has been added for the last stanza, to give it a “lift.” In fact, a number of the traditional hymn tunes represented in the collection have descants, or varied harmonizations for final verses, to help congregations experience a familiar tune in a new “dress.”

Another excellent pairing of new text and old tune is Herman Stuempfle's "Jesus, Tempted in the Desert." The mocking of the tempter and the steadfast faith of Jesus are strongly emphasized in the choice of "Ebenezer" for the tune (which includes a dramatic free harmonization by David N. Johnson).

These familiar-sounding tunes, for the most part, appear with texts by some of the most respected hymn writers of the present day: Shirley Erena Murray, Jane Parker Huber, Carl P. Daw, Jr., Ruth Duck, Brian Wren, Thomas Troeger, Alice Parker, Fred Pratt Green, and others.

A number of older "gospel hymns" are included— "Come, Ye Disconsolate," "The Lily of the Valley," "I'll Fly Away," "Living for Jesus," "Just a Closer Walk with Thee"—which bring the flavor of neighboring Protestant traditions into the praise of Presbyterians.

Several new hymns by the team of Mary Nelson Keithahn and John D. Horman have been chosen, and wisely, for their poetic quality and musical appeal. Some popular hymns from decades in the recent past—for example, "We Are One in the Spirit"—are included in the repertory again.

International and Ethnic Hymns

The real strength, musically, in the collection lies in the rich selection of international and ethnic hymns. Hispanic, Caribbean, and African songs are included, generally with very manageable keyboard accompaniments, and with chords for guitar accompaniment or cues for percussion to make them more authentic. Texts are usually in both the original language and in an English translation. Interestingly, there is a noticeable lack of Asian hymns in the supplement, considering the large numbers of Koreans and others who are affiliated with the Presbyterian denomination (Swee Hong Lim's "Lord, Have Mercy," as harmonized by Carlton Young, is a laudable exception). A few African-American spirituals have been included, in arrangements that may be suitable for both choirs and congregational singing.

Music from the Taizé and Iona Communities

More and more congregations are discovering the inspiration of meditative services in the traditions of Taizé and Iona, where simple repetitious chants by the worshipers are enlivened by a cantor and enhanced by a variety of instruments. The selected songs feature all the parts necessary to perform them. This collection could well serve as an introduction to this style of worship for congregations who have not had the opportunity to experience it. The wonderful song from Iona by John Bell, "The Summons," sung to *Kelvingrove*, is a treasure of the collection.

Contemporary Ballads

The “contemporary Christian” genre exploded some twenty years ago and shows no signs of abating. *Sing the Faith* contains selections by some of the most popular exponents of this style —Marty Haugen, Tom Fettke, Ken Medema, Andrae Crouch, Michael W. Smith, Twila Paris, and Kurt Kaiser.

The difficulty with much of this music, especially in traditional worship settings, is that it is often too rhythmically complex for many congregations to sing. It is one thing to listen to it being performed by energetic singers, accompanied by the proper instrumentation, and quite another to introduce it with piano or organ to a congregation during worship. Many of these pieces may be very successful as solos, duets, or choir selections, but do not lend themselves to congregational singing. “One God and Father of Us All” is such a song. Some of the arrangements in the collection, like “Great Is the Lord,” are too musically dramatic to be effectively used as congregational song.

Several “classics” of the contemporary Christian style have been included: “Sanctuary,” “He Is Exalted,” “Blest Are They,” “In Remembrance of Me,” and “Holy Ground” are just a few examples.

Praise Songs

There is a more than generous supply of “praise songs” or “choruses” in the collection, which can easily be identified by their repeat signs, simplistic texts, repetitive melodies, and simple harmonies. Those who favor this style of hymnody will not be disappointed.

Conclusion

While many congregations will find *Sing the Faith* a valuable resource for enriching their worship, a major weakness of the collection is that it did not go through an especially careful, thorough examination process. It was proposed in the summer of 2002 by the Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, studied by the Office of Research Services (rather than the denomination’s Office of Theology and Worship), and published in 2003. The copyright notice states that the collection was “adapted and compiled” from *The Faith We Sing*, a United Methodist hymnal supplement; a new title page and a few “Presbyterian” replacements transformed this United Methodist resource into a Presbyterian one. A number of other hymns (“Rise Up, Shepherd, and Follow” and “When Jesus Wept,” for instance) could have been replaced, since they duplicate items already in the *Presbyterian Hymnal*.

Each denomination enjoys distinctions in its heritage, its constituency, and its worship style. While *Sing the Faith* does its job well—introducing a variety of contemporary musical expressions—it must be approached with a sensitive and selective spirit for each congregation by skillful musicians who can achieve the best possible interpretation, and by pastors and educators alert to the need to balance familiarity with variety.