

# Christian Worship in Retrospect

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THE “NEW HYMNAL” OF THE Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS), *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal*, made its official debut on 7 August 1993 at the synod’s convention in Saginaw, Michigan. Rev. Victor Prange, the chairman of the Joint Hymnal Committee (JHC) responsible for the hymnal’s production, presented a finished copy to WELS president Rev. Carl H. Mischke with the prayer that “our gracious God will bless its use in the worship of his people for many years to come.”<sup>1</sup>

It would appear that this prayer has been answered in the affirmative. Since its introduction more than a decade ago, *Christian Worship* has become the hymnal for the WELS. Nearly every WELS congregation today has *Christian Worship* in its pew racks—an outcome that commendably fulfills the original intent and desire of the synod’s authorizing resolution made in 1983, namely, that the WELS produce a “new/revised hymnal of its own, one that under the blessings of God will be . . . welcomed and judged to be highly satisfactory . . . by a majority of our members.”<sup>2</sup>

The road to *Christian Worship*’s debut was long, and traveled unfamiliar ground. As the preface to *Christian Worship* notes, preliminary deliberations for a new hymnal went back to the 1950s when the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) invited the WELS to participate in a revision of *The Lutheran Hymnal*. But the revision project was dropped in the mid-1960s by the LCMS in favor of an effort that eventually produced *Lutheran Book of Worship* (1978) and *Lutheran Worship* (1982). The WELS Commission on Worship carefully studied both *Lutheran Book of Worship* and *Lutheran Worship* as possible replacements for *The Lutheran Hymnal*, but found both unsuited to the worship situation of the WELS. As a result, the Commission on Worship recommended that the synod produce its own “new/revised hymnal,” a recommendation that was adopted by the synod’s convention in 1983.

At the time of the decision, there was skepticism about what the WELS could and would produce. Much of the early work on the hymnal project was expended on defining the structure of the hymnal’s taskforce and the process it would follow in accomplishing its goal. It is interesting to note that at this time the synod did not have any administrative personnel serving the

worship needs of the synod in a full-time capacity. Proportionate to the size of the WELS, there was a cadre of individuals in the synod—pastors, teachers, professors, and musicians—with interest and the needed skills, but not necessarily the time to devote to such a project. So a key element to the project’s success became the calling of Rev. Kurt Eggert to serve as full-time project director. Eggert first helped form and then worked with the JHC on the hymnal. He also oversaw the establishment of a process to inform and prepare the synod’s congregations for the new hymnal. In view of Eggert’s contributions to the project, one of the more poignant stories from the creation of the hymnal was how the first finished copy of *Christian Worship* was presented to him at his hospital bed shortly before his death in June 1993.

Concurrent with the publication of *Christian Worship* in 1993 was *Christian Worship: Manual*. This auxiliary volume contains the propers for the church year along with instructional and practical material for planning worship and for celebrating the various orders of service and rites in the hymnal. Since 1993 separate committees have produced *Christian Worship: Altar Book* (1999), *Christian Worship: Occasional Services* (2004), and *Christian Worship: Pastor’s Companion* (2004). With these volumes, the full range of hymnal and liturgical resources desired by the synod as replacements for *The Lutheran Hymnal* and its auxiliary books is complete.

At the time of the publication of *Christian Worship*, there were various criticisms and misgivings about the book. Victor Prange of the JHC recalls that within the WELS,

Pastors heard complaints from congregation members; letters were fired off to members of the JHC and synod officials. Most often *Christian Worship* was compared unfavorably with *The Lutheran Hymnal*. Some faulted revision of the texts; others weren’t happy with things musical; a few didn’t like much of anything in the new book.”<sup>3</sup>

Other Lutherans also gave the book initial mixed reviews. However, the track record of *Christian Worship* established by the high congregational adoption rate and numbers of copies purchased over the last decade suggests general acceptance and satisfaction within the WELS. Voices beyond the Wisconsin Synod have also since favorably commented on the book noting especially its ease of use and its format for singing the psalms.

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It is the psalms of *Christian Worship* that have proven to be one of the book's most surprising successes. Before the introduction of *Christian Worship*, Wisconsin Synod congregations rarely used the psalms in worship beyond the introits of *The Lutheran Hymnal* and a responsively read psalm at mid-week evening Lenten services. Chanting the psalms was virtually unheard of and rejected as being "too high church." Yet over the last decade, *Christian Worship* has restored the psalms to regular usage in the synod's worship and has paved the way for widespread singing of the psalms by WELS congregations. This, in turn, has helped overcome the long-standing bias in the WELS against chanting in general and chanting by the pastor in particular.

The WELS has grown in its worship life from the experience of creating a new hymnal and from the hymnal it has created. For instance, the experience has led to changes within the synod's Board of Parish Services. Today a full-time worship administrator and staff serve the WELS through the Commission on Worship and a network of worship coordinators in the synod's districts. Revitalized interest in the theology and practice of worship has led to several national conferences for pastors, teachers, musicians, and interested laymen. Worship topics generated by the experience of the hymnal's creation are often heard at pastoral conferences. The use of *Christian Worship* and its various rites and services has decidedly broadened the overall worship life of the synod. This stands in bold contrast with the practice of much of the synod during the time of *The Lutheran Hymnal*. The liturgical practice of the WELS was originally formed in pietism: *The Lutheran Hymnal* (after its own difficult introduction) was used in a decidedly idiosyncratic Wisconsin Synod manner so that much of the richness of that book remained unused or ignored. *Christian Worship* has served in the past decade to open up much of the WELS to better, more authentic liturgical practice and usage than was accomplished under *The Lutheran Hymnal*.

The auxiliary books are also noteworthy in this connection. *Christian Worship: Altar Book* and the instruction afforded in *Christian Worship: Manual* provide solid direction in sound Lutheran liturgical worship practice. The recently published *Christian Worship: Occasional Services* includes a liturgical section offering the synod such rites as the imposition of ashes, the complete liturgies of the *Triduum*, and fresh settings of Compline (Prayer at the Close of Day). These additions have the potential of growing the synod's worship life even further.

The hymns of *Christian Worship* have also expanded the synod's hymnody to include a wider range of "new" hymns. Following the principle enunciated by Eggert as "pressing on to

the future while holding on to [the] past," the book contains 623 hymns that range across a spectrum of styles, eras, and emphases. Imbalances or omitted emphases in *The Lutheran Hymnal* have been corrected (such as the overly large number of New Year's hymns); seasonal hymn offerings have been enlarged.

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The experience of the last decade has revealed the need for some revisions and additions. The success of the psalms has highlighted the need to expand the somewhat limited numbers of psalms included in *Christian Worship* and to offer more varied and complex chant lines. The alternate baptism rite in *Christian Worship: Occasional Services* was crafted to provide a more traditional form than that included in the hymnal. New settings of the Common Service using the standard English texts for the liturgy have been written to further "round out" the worship resources of the book.

The need for revision and change will be met through one of the greatest benefits derived from the experience of creating *Christian Worship*, namely, the experience itself. Along with a raised worship consciousness created by the book, the WELS today is the beneficiary of expertise and talent developed in connection with the creation of *Christian Worship*. The wisdom gained from creating *Christian Worship* will do much to shape the eventual revision and updating of the hymnal and may be counted on to continue to move the WELS forward in Lutheran liturgical worship in the future. **LOGIA**

#### NOTES

1. Victor H. Prange, "The Shaping of *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal*," *Not Unto Us: A Celebration of the Ministry of Kurt J. Eggert* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2001), 245. For the interested reader, this article presents the most comprehensive published recollection of the writing of *Christian Worship* by one of the members of the JHC.
2. WELS Forty-Seventh Biennial Convention *Proceedings*, 90.
3. Prange, 251.