



Anticipating a New Hymnal During a Pandemic

By Adam Mueller

Worship looks different in a pandemic. From the middle of March through the middle of May, most churches were not permitted to meet publicly. Some were shuttered even longer. In their holy zeal to feed their flock with the Word, congregations took their worship online. Although most churches have reopened, only a fraction of people who were habitually in the house of the LORD have returned. Many who attend do so wearing a face covering. Those churches with robust choirs and diverse instruments have scaled back their programs; some musicians are not ready to return. Communion distribution has been adjusted, and bottles of Purell are now as common as Bibles and hymnals.

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Human nature will quickly lament what has been lost. Worshiping online lends itself well enough to the spoken word, but it has limitations. Singing is a challenge. It's easier for dad's clunker notes to be absorbed in the nave than the living room. When the pastor picks a less familiar hymn, family members glance uncomfortably at one another in silence while they wait for verse five to finish. And what about the sacraments? Technological distance makes the congregation's promises at a baptism feel less personal and doesn't enable Holy Communion at all.

Perhaps we are asking the wrong question. Sure, worship looks different in a pandemic. But what has been gained? How about a noble yearning to be found in the house of the LORD? You don't know what you've got until it's gone. How about a renewed sense of appreciation for the worshiping body of believers? One woman quipped to me, "I never realized how important these people are to me." How about a new online presence for hundreds of our churches who are reaching souls they would never otherwise have

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reached? It's as if God sent a pandemic with a memo: "When I told to you make disciples of *all nations*, I meant it! Get the Word to the world!"

Pastors and congregations will always find hundreds of things to do, but they all serve the main goal of touching the Gospel of Christ to as many people as possible as often as possible. A church may have dozens of ministries that serve dozens of people, but no other parish ministry has the reach of public worship. Perhaps that is because worship skillfully weds the means of grace with oratory and music while joining believers from the past to the present in praise of God. God will bless every effort to spread his Gospel throughout the world. Since worship is a primary vehicle through which we proclaim God's grace, we can count on him to bless our best efforts in worship.

For some time now, our best worship minds and most talented musicians have invested countless hours to produce a suite of

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worship materials tailored for all kinds of churches, from mission congregations to large congregations. Headlined by a new hymnal and comprehensive psalter, 20 unique products in this suite of worship tools are slated for release in fall of 2021.¹ Like a movie preview, leaders gave a sneak peek of hymnal project content at the January 2020 WELS leadership conference. Copies of *Christian Worship: Preview* were distributed to every participant. *Forward in Christ* articles and the February WELS Connection generated enthusiasm. Near the end of February, copies of *Christian Worship: Preview* were mailed to every congregation. And then the pandemic hit. Public gatherings were suspended; schools and churches moved online; elders and church leaders scrambled to find alternative ways to serve the flock. Evaluating a new suite of worship products was relegated to the back burner.

If your “pandemic parish” looked anything like mine, *Christian Worship: Preview* found a cozy corner of the copy room to rest undisturbed. Let this article be an encouragement to wake them from slumber. Inside that 60-page booklet is a wonderful walk-through of the treasures you will find in the new suite of worship resources. Permit me to break those treasures down into the following four parts.

Treasures old

When you hear “hymnal suite of products” and “nearly 20 volumes of worship content,” are you intimidated? Don’t be. At the heart of the 2021 project is a hymnal that includes so many familiar treasures that you can use it with confidence immediately.²

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Worship will continue to follow the time-tested pattern of the church year that has served well for centuries. The three-year lectionary has been retuned so that the readings and psalm support the thrust of Gospel. All readings unify around a central theme, making it easier for worshipers to see how the Scriptures are interconnected and to benefit from one central theme each Sunday.



Christian Worship (1993) offered two communion liturgies, “The Common Service” and “The Service of Word and Sacrament.” Those beloved services served the church well for years. However, certain texts, canticles, and even the logical flow were unique to each liturgy. Communion liturgies in *Christian Worship* (2021) will be unified by a familiar format and flow.³ Titled “The Service,” it will provide opportunity for us to invoke the presence of God, confess our sins and be absolved, hear the Word, confess the faith and pray together, and receive the Supper. Interspersed throughout we will sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to one another. Three musical settings of “The Service” will be included in the printed hymnal.⁴ Setting One makes use of music from “The Common Service” that Lutherans have been using since 1941, but with four-part harmony restored for the canticles.

It is difficult to describe the connection that people have to hymns. In adulthood, both men and women remember wistfully their grandmother singing “Abide with Me” as they put them to bed. As they wait to meet God in the ICU, pastors sing “Be Still My Soul” or “I Know that My Redeemer Lives.” Two thirds of the 2021 hymns are favorites that have served Lutherans for generations. Luther’s insistence that hymnody proclaim the Gospel is another old treasure that is retained. *Christian Worship: Preview* spends more than twenty pages (pp 32-52) detailing the kinds of hymns that will be included.⁵ Reviewing those pages will be time well spent.

Treasures new

Just because an 8-year-old boy likes Legos doesn’t mean he wants his mother to repackage an old box and “regift” it to him for his birthday. Similarly, Lutherans who enjoy the familiarity and integrity of our rich worship heritage also expect that there will be new treasures to unpack as well as old. They will not be disappointed.

First, while the text of “The Service” remains the same, worship leaders can easily incorporate meaningful variety through various musical settings. In addition to the settings that are included in the pew edition, *Christian Worship: Service Builder* will include several more musical settings (more on *Service Builder* later). The diversity of musical settings provides an ability to bring musical freshness to worship within the context of a familiar pattern of worship.

Secondly, the psalms are significantly expanded. Congregations that have grown to love chanted psalm tones will have many options. But the hymnal and psalter will also include additional psalm styles: hymn type, melodic folk tunes, call and response format, and lyrical. Lyrical psalms lend themselves to solo or choral singing. So many excellent settings of the psalms exist that the best ones will be curated in a separate volume, *Christian Worship: Psalter*. This volume is worth consideration first for your choir or even just a cantor. Over time, people will grow to love the new treasures in psalm singing. *CW: Preview* gives details on pages 19-31.

Worshipers familiar with *Christian Worship: Supplement* quickly grew to love a modern hymn, “In Christ Alone.” It even serves as the introductory music to our monthly WELS Connection. No

new hymnal is truly new unless it includes new hymns. Twentieth and twenty-first century hymn writers, American composers, and modern favorites have been carefully vetted. Offerings from Getty Music are plentiful⁶, as well newly composed music for time-tested texts. Congregations will have many new hymn treasures to unpack and enjoy.

Treasures in the home

When the LORD repeated the law in Deuteronomy, he enlisted parents to hand the faith down to their children. “Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up” (Deuteronomy 6:7). It’s no secret that the family altar is hurting, with devastating effect on our families and churches. Inside our upcoming hymnal, however, are treasures ready for the home. Can we encourage our parents and families that hymnals are not just for church anymore?

On the first three pages of *CW: Preview* you are introduced to the Scripture section. In addition to the church year lectionary, a daily lectionary will be included. Readings are chosen to harmonize with times and seasons of the year, and are easy to incorporate into another hymnal treasure for the home: the daily office. Brief devotional rites for various times of the day (dawn, mid-morning, noon, mid-afternoon, and evening) when paired with the daily lectionary, provide fathers and families a ready-made tool to build the family altar.

Famously, Luther introduced his Small Catechism thus: “As the head of the family should teach them in the simplest way to those in his household.” The Small Catechism will be printed in the hymnal, yet another devotional treasure for parents to use in the home. Between the text of the catechism, devotional hymns, ready to use psalms, the daily lectionary, and many other treasures old and new, busy parents will be able to incorporate a regular devotional life in the home. Pastors will find it easy to recommend the hymnal for home use.

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Treasures for leaders

Worship planning has matured from what it was in past generations. Sending Sunday’s hymn selections to your keyboardist on Saturday and asking the assembly to open to page 15 the next morning maybe once passed muster. (But shouldn’t have!) Now, worship leaders are expected to plan worship out at least month or quarter in advance. That good practice allows better lead time for your instrumentalists, vocalists, and choirs to prepare their musical offerings for the LORD and his people. Advanced planning also accommodates wider variety in worship. Even simple efforts help feed the flock and attract more sheep. Attracting more

Evaluating, budgeting, and special gifts

Here is one possible process leading to a decision to adopt new hymnal resources—with all respect for the realities noted in the first endnote.

- In advance of a first meeting members of the worship committee or some other subcommittee review *CW: Preview* (content also available online) and additional material at the hymnal Web site (christianworship.com), especially the Q&A section under Resources. Start with viewing again the February 2020 WELS Connection, available under the Preview option.
- The committee recommends to the church council the initial resources to obtain and others to consider in the future. The Q&A section includes helpful information about the *CW: Service Builder* software. At the bottom of the Resources page is a budgeting spreadsheet.
- If the council approves the plan, the next step is budgeting (this fall yet for calendar year budgets, or early next year for fiscal year budgets) and encouragement of special gifts.
- Use items from the Publicity Toolkit to inform members. Consider a special presentation after worship. Note that special offering envelopes are available from NPH; see *CW: Preview* page 60.

If leaders feel that more information is necessary, additional content will be posted to the hymnal Web site later this year and early next year. And for those who need a thorough review with new hymnal in hand, introductory workshops are being planned for fall of 2021.

sheep—or not frustrating them in worship—has been the logic for another shift. Producing the entire service in a printed folder allows everybody to follow along seamlessly. Preparing a short “bulletin” might once have required only a small investment of pastoral time; now it can take many hours a week to prepare a true “worship folder.”

When we published our first hymnal in 1993, Windows 3.1 was ubiquitous. Technological advancements now make it possible to reduce the time needed for advanced worship planning. A cloud-based software solution, *Christian Worship: Service Builder*, is an obvious treasure for worship leaders. Planning services, including variety, making changes on the fly, allowing for widespread communication, automated copyright reporting, and producing service folders are all tasks that *Service Builder* can handle in a matter of minutes.



Smaller congregations might benefit the most from advanced technology. In churches without a keyboardist for live music, digital keyboards and computers have led worship via MIDI or HymnSoft. Technology has advanced to the point that any smart phone or tablet plays high quality music. Hymnal project resources will be provided in high quality digital format for use with a new tool called *Christian Worship: Playlist*. Leading worship will be as easy as compiling a playlist and clicking play.

Musicians will appreciate another technology tool. You are planning to sing the Gloria, aware that an eager teen would like to play her clarinet to the glory of God. Where do you find clarinet music for the Gloria? Inside the online *Musician's Resource*! This online tool contains alternate settings, musical arrangements, and instrumental parts to serve the unique needs and gifts of your church.

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Technology levels the playing field for churches of different sizes. Sometimes pastors or members experience well-done worship in person or online, but feel deflated because "you can do that sort of worship in a big church, but we can't in our small church." When the content of the hymnal suite of products is paired with technology, every congregation will be able to enjoy the treasure of producing professional looking service folders, employing artistic variety, and leading worship with high-quality digital music. You can learn more about new hymnal technology in *Christian Worship: Preview* on pages 53-55.

Putting tools to work

Put a hammer in a mason's hand, and the framing will take longer. Put a trowel in a carpenter's hand, and the project will cost twice as much and take twice as long. The right tool for the job is essential. Since worship is the primary vehicle through which we build the faith of the flock, it's worth our best efforts. It also deserves our best tools. Over the past eight years, almost 100 of our

brothers and sisters have invested thousands of hours to produce tools beneficial for worship.

Of course, a tool is only as good as the person who uses it. Some of the tools will be ready to use right out of the box. Others will take time and practice to master. Just like a skilled craftsman, some tools you'll use every week, while other tools you'll employ for special circumstances. It is heartening and reassuring to know that whatever the job, you have the tools necessary to carry it out without a dozen trips to the local hardware store.

You will also find it heartening and reassuring to know that the 2021 hymnal suite of products will provide you with the tools you need to lead and feed the flock. Like the hammer your dad gave you in your youth, there will be treasures old. Like the shiny new tool you received for Father's Day, there will be treasures new. Add to that the practicality of home use and time-saving technology. Congregations large and small can anticipate the new hymnal with excitement.

If your copy of *Christian Worship: Preview* has found a place in the corner of the workroom since the pandemic, grab a copy and familiarize yourself with the treasures inside. Work through it with your worship committee, your elders, and your council so that they also can appreciate the good things to come.

¹ Hymnal project leaders recognize that not every congregation will want to or be able to adopt the new hymnal in 2021. Reasons include COVID uncertainties, tightened budgets, and uncertain futures. This article isn't meant to ignore those realities but only to encourage review and planning in whatever way seems appropriate.

² Plus it isn't necessary to jump in and buy all resources at once. At christianworship.com under Planning Ahead only three items are listed as basic resources.

³ A rationale and outline of The Service was posted at christianworship.com in September 2020.

⁴ More information about these musical options plus additional settings mentioned below is available at the rationale/outline document in note 3.

⁵ *CW: Preview* content is also available at christianworship.com.

⁶ A partial list is at christianworship.com under the Q&A section.

C20 – Christmas 2020 resources

C20 is a synod-wide initiative to encourage and equip WELS congregations to invite the unchurched to worship this Christmas. Download promotional, outreach, worship, Sunday school, social media, graphics resources, and more at welscongregationalservices.net/c20. Don't forget to order postcards by Oct. 23. Information about ordering and printing is in the "Introduction" document under "Getting Started."