

Sing for Joy with Voices Together

Zephaniah 3:14-20, Col.3:16 by Patty Friesen January 9, 2022

Colossians 3:16 “With gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs.”

And so we have been singing with gratitude this morning. Slide 1 - A year ago our new hymnals arrived at the Mennonite Church Saskatchewan offices and vans and cars from all over the city and valley were loading them up to take to waiting hands in churches. After the Fourth Sunday of Advent last year, everyone in the sanctuary took the blue hymnals, Sing the Story and Sing the Journey out of the pew racks and we carried them out to the lobby and decommissioned them. Then in went the Voices Together for Christmas Sunday and we’ve fallen in love with it. Some of us joined a Voices Together Zoom class with Nutana Park Mennonite Church this fall, and you never saw a bunch of Mennonites so excited about a new hymnal. It’s kind of nerdy actually and this nerdy sermon arises from this class.

Hymnals are generational. They reflect the rhythms of the Holy Spirit, moving among God’s people in a particular era. We’ve had 18 printed hymnals in 500 years of Anabaptist history. Interestingly, we’ve also had 14 Confessions of Faith in our 500 years. Our music parallels our faith. The last Confession of Faith 1995 came out with the blue hymnal during the reconfiguring of Mennonite Church Canada and Mennonite Church USA. While not an official Confession of Faith, Voices Together turned to the beloved confession by Menno Simons #921 and the Mennonite World Conference Shared Convictions #925 as points of reference for what we believe and how that can be reflected in our music.

Does that mean everyone will see their personal theology mirrored back on every page of the new hymnal? Likely not, as it is not the intent of a hymnal to be doctrinal. Rather than a book for personal piety, a denominational hymnal represents the theological and artistic breadth of the

church. It connects us with Anabaptists around the world and in our neighbourhoods—even those with whom we may disagree theologically. While our congregation might choose not to sing a song for theological reasons, others might find that piece central to faithfully following Jesus.”

I invite you at home and in the sanctuary to pick up your Voices Together hymnal if you have one. How do you feel as you hold this new collection of church music? What emotions arise? How about those on our worship crew this morning – how do you feel holding this book? Those on Facebook can comment as well. Were you as scared as I was? It is such an important tool for us as a denomination and as a local congregation in worship that I was scared it would be too new, too weird, and too inaccessible. Are my favourite heart songs going to be included? The songs my family has sung at our funerals for generations like So Nimm Die Meine Hande, Take Thou My Hand #631? I was pleased to find that most of them and so we will sing 631.

As a congregant receiving this new hymnal last year - what were your first impressions holding this new hymnal? Did you notice the colour? Did you notice different symbols - here is a dove of peace on the front whereas the Hymnal A Worship Book had a lamb. The dove represents the infusing Holy Spirit and Voices Together is infused with songs about the Holy Spirit - see if you think that is true. From their website: “a lot of listening has gone into creating Voices Together. Through focus groups, “heart song” surveys, four samplers, and countless events, the committee has gathered much insight. Voices Together emerges out of this careful listening. It’s our sincere prayer that Voices Together reflects who we are theologically and how we have opened ourselves to movements of the Spirit.”

Slide 5 art – What else do we notice about the hymnal? There is art scattered throughout with scriptures and songs, like #333 Easter Hymn Low in the Grave is paired with #334 a pen

and ink art piece titled Alive by Anne Hostetler Berry from the US in 2018. Anyone notice anything else? There are chords for hymns for guitars and those who play piano by chord. Keep your hymnal open for a second. Slide 6 - Voices Together has the same font as the blue hymnal which makes it easier for our eyes to adjust to a new song like – please turn over to #341 Christ has arisen in Swahili. There are 42 languages in Voices Together. Slide 7 - If you turn to #850 there is a sending of peace in 22 languages including sign language. The new hymnal draws us into the languages and cultures and realities of other people and that's important during this time.

Slide 8 – Singer – so in the spirit of awareness of the civil rights movement let's sing #803 – We Shall Overcome. Our class also wondered if it was appropriate to sing songs from other languages and cultures when we don't really understand them or do them justice. Someone commented that our younger generations have been singing German songs without doing them justice for years! Music teacher Duff Warkentin said that when the blue hymnal came out with Zulu Asithi Amen and Thuma Mina and French Je louerai l'éternel- Praise, I will praise you Lord and Spanish Tu has venido a la orilla - Lord You have come to the lakeshore - we jumped on it fearlessly and sang in these new languages whether we were good at it or not. We observed that we may sing in other languages less now than 20 years ago but we hoped we could recover some of the new Arabic and Hebrew songs and some of the stories behind them like #707 Dona Nobis – slide 9 Pacem, which we learned in the blue hymnal in Latin. When this Latin call to peace was sung at a camp for Israelis and Palestinians at St. Gabriel church in Nazareth, they added the Hebrew and Arabic and sang it over and over while dancing. The stories behind the hymns help us appreciate them and courageously learn new heart songs. Let us sing #707.

We also observe that there are more hymns with many images for God and Christ from scripture and hymns that include biblical women like #190 The God of Sarah Praise. I love that.

I love the land acknowledgement at the back of the hymnal #878. The Indigenous Languages Subcommittee to carefully craft land acknowledgement and inclusion of indigenous languages, authors and composers. They made the tough decision not to include the Huron Christmas Carol - Twas in the Moon of Wintertime because of it wasn't written by an indigenous person and it framed indigenous people in a stereotypical way.

Slide 10 - Imagine you were on the Voices Together Hymnal Committee. What a huge task! What values would you want reflected in church music for 2020? Their website says worship is the heart of the church and it is in worship when we come together to honour God. On any given Sunday in a Mennonite church you will find worship happening in myriad ways—with music often forming a central part of what we do in worship.

Slide 11 - The committee began in 2014 and surveyed the church and began with 10,000 loved songs from previous hymnals. How do you whittle 10,000 down from to 748? Knowing that any congregation will only sing 200 songs regularly - would you want more songs to reflect our culturally diverse and international church? Would you want more inclusive language for women and men and more biblical images for God and Christ? Just before publication, Catholic composer David Haas had 45 charges of sexual misconduct so they left all his work out of the new hymnal including one of our congregation's favourite, Peace before us #16 in Sing the Story. But our OMC worship committee supported the decision of Voices Together not to let Haas to continue to profit financially from his work in Mennonite Hymnals. Finally the committee's work was complete after 5 years in 2019. We owe the VT committee a deep thanks for their prayerful and thoughtful work.

Some of our old heart songs like How Great Thou Art that were missing from the blue hymnal have come back to the new hymnal so with old heart songs and new heart songs hopefully we are bonding with this hymnal for the next generation. I believe it came at the right time as a comfort in the middle of a pandemic. There are new hymns that relate to particular issues of memory loss, body image, creation care, etc. When we are back together – we'll have a 4 week Adult Education digging deeper into this powerful shaping resource of how we grow deeper into our relationships with God and with each other.

Just for fun – I'll end with the observation is that new Mennonite hymnals not only seem to pair with new Mennonite Confessions of Faith but they also seem to pair with new Mennonite cookbooks! Slide 13 - I grew up with the red 1969 hymnal at church and the Mennonite Community Cookbook at home. Both were in English and that was new but they still included German hymns and German recipes, as comfort songs and comfort food.

Slide 14 - In the 1970s when more people served with Mennonite Central Committee overseas and learned to appreciate other cultures, our cookbooks became more international, more rice and bean based as in the More with Less cookbook by Doris Longacre Janzen in 1976. Sing & Rejoice songbook came out in 1979 which included more folksongs and Spanish songs and guitar songs and protest songs reflecting our rising world and social conscience.

Slide 15 - Extending the Table Cookbook boosted international awareness to a new level in 1991 as did the diversity of international music in our new 1992 Hymnal a Worship Book with songs and prayers in more languages.

Slide 16 - the next generation of cookbook Simply in Season 2005 reflected raised awareness of eating locally along with the green Sing the Story 2005 and purple Sing the Journey 2007 also reflected more locally accessible music - poetic one-liners for easier singing for

newcomers to the Mennonite Church. Slide 17 – Now in 2020 Menno Night-Caps Cocktail Mixing book pairs with 2020 Voices Together! It appears that as our singing becomes more diverse so does our eating and our cocktails!

Slide 15 - I will lead us in the closing prayer #882: We are people who must sing you, for the sake of our very lives. You are a God who must be sung by us, for the sake of your majesty and honour. And so we thank you, for lyrics that push us past our reasons, for melodies that break open our givens, for cadences that locate us home, beyond all our safe places, for tones and tunes that open our lives beyond control and our futures beyond despair. We thank you for the long parade of mothers and fathers who have sung you deep and true; we thank you for the good company of artists, poets, musicians, cantors and instruments that sing for us and with us, toward you. We are witnesses to your mercy and splendour; we will not keep silent...ever again. Amen.