Sing A New Song! Theological Reflection Based in Hymn Text Writing:
A Workshop

by

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Abstract
Scripture exhorts the faithful to “Sing a new song!” but for many worshipers their songs are still predominantly those of a bygone theological era in terms of the language and imagery with which both God and people are described. Since hymns have long been understood to be major contributors to the shaping of personal theologies, and with inclusivity a contemporary justice issue in the United Church of Canada, it seemed desirable to find a way to address this perceived problem.

Based on the commonly accepted premise that one learns best by doing, and supported by the dialogic adult learning strategies developed by educators Jane Vella and Patricia Cranton, a workshop in hymn-text writing for parishioners was designed and tested with ten volunteer participants. The purpose of this intervention was two-fold: to evaluate the structure and teaching efficacy of the workshop itself while teaching participants the basics of hymn construction, style and content, and to offer participants an opportunity for theological reflection and discovery. An open-ended, process theology approach was the underlying orientation; the researcher was interested to learn what types of transformative thinking or behaviours the participants might experience as a result of their hymn text writing and small-group discussions.
The workshop was deemed a success, in that every participant produced a thoughtful, technically sound hymn and there was general agreement that it had been a positive experience. Weaknesses in the workshop design were identified and will be amended in future editions. Some type of transformative learning took place in each individual, with a range from primarily factual information to deeply spiritual insights. The long-term impact of the experience remains to be seen, but if only a general sense of empowerment through the new skill of hymn writing, and an increased awareness of hymns and their role in faith expression are the immediate results of the exercise, it was worthwhile.

Although a few other hymn-text writing workshops have been published, this one breaks new ground by consciously adding the element of theological reflection. With some adaptation, it can be used by denominations outside the United Church.
Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation with great affection and gratitude to my father, Hermann Eibich (1921-2006). It was at his side, at an early age, that I fell in love with the beauty and inspiration of congregational song. He would have been proud to know that his musical influence would one day lead to a doctorate.
Acknowledgements

A doctoral dissertation relies on the support and active involvement of many people. I wish to acknowledge, with deep gratitude:

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and my husband Harold, last but not least, for computer assistance, emotional support, and faith in the successful conclusion of five years of work. I could not have done this without him.
Abbreviations


UCC  [The] United Church of Canada

S.D.G.  Soli Deo Gloria – Latin for “To God alone the glory.”
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Chapter 1 Introduction

“Behold, Behold, I make all things new, beginning with you . . .”¹

Preface

I will begin with three true stories.

Looking for a bit of light-hearted entertainment at the end of a church meeting, I had the choir sing a few hymns from the nineteenth century, with texts by F.M Lehman. To modern ears these texts can hardly help elicit smiles, which was my intention. “King Nicotine Must Die!” was followed by “Give God Your Pencil” and “Up a Cocoanut [sic] Tree.” (“they’re guessing, just guessing – we’re no relation to the monkey up a cocoanut tree.”) The last song, “The Royal Telephone” (“built by God the Father for His loved and own, we may talk to Jesus through this royal telephone.”) brought about the anticipated laughter, and then a furious, tearful outburst from an elderly congregant: “How dare you make fun! That hymn brought me to Jesus!” I learned that day how powerfully hymns help form and influence our faith.

By way of contrast, a member of the church’s women’s group approached me for advice in choosing the hymns for a meeting for which she was to lead the worship. “It’s getting harder and harder to find hymns in Voices United that speak for me,” she lamented.² “All that God the Father and King language in there . . . When will a new hymn book come out?” This woman, too, was in her senior years. Her complaint showed


me that congregants vary widely in their sensitivity to, and desire for, updated language and theological concepts in the hymns we sing.

And there was Grace, an eager participant in one of my hymn writing workshops, who was at first reluctant to share her text, believing it to be too somber and introspective. Paraphrasing parts of Psalm 130, the hymn described her personal journey through the depths of mental illness and her gratitude for healing. I told her how surprised I was; that I had not known this part of her history. “No,” she replied, she had kept it pretty private “until now; writing that hymn somehow freed me to tell others about my story, and that feels so wonderful.” I learned from Grace that hymn writing has the power to be transformative.

These encounters illustrate the basic arguments underlying my thesis: Because hymns play a significant role in shaping our spirituality, they do well to reflect current theological thought and affirm life-giving contemporary norms. To the extent that they do not, they risk perpetuating images and concepts belonging to previous eras which have become problematic, such as making reference to God using exclusively male pronouns and male-oriented metaphors. As hymn writer and theologian Brian Wren observes, “language change is an essential part of action.” While there is room for the enrichment of balance in our metaphors, to speak and sing predominantly in a particular metaphorical system is to skew our beliefs, our behaviour, and the beliefs of succeeding generations in

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3 Pseudonym

a way that may no longer match the best of how we intend to think and act, since issues of justice and inclusivity are involved. In their emotional intensity, hymns can lead to transformative experiences. Since we learn best by doing, it seemed to me that one way to encourage such transformation is through the effort of writing a hymn text. To facilitate such writing for lay congregants, I have designed a workshop whose effectiveness in teaching the craft of hymn text writing, as well as in fostering theological reflection, is the focus of my study.

In this chapter I will describe my ministry context, elaborate on the impetus for this project, list the questions I hope to answer, admit to basic assumptions and personal biases, and list definitions, delimitations and limitations.

Ministry Context: an educational ministry of hymnody.

My ministry is exercised through sacred music. I pray, preach and teach with my hands and feet at the organ, the piano, waving a baton or shaking a tambourine, in solitary practice sessions, in front of choirs at rehearsal, in music leadership at Sunday worship. I lead denominational music workshops and hymn sings, write articles for newsletters and journals, compose hymns, and serve on professional committees for church musicians and clergy. Among the latter are the Royal Canadian College of Organists, The Hymn Society in the United States and Canada, and the Ontario Guild of English Handbell Ringers. I was a founding member of the United Church of Canada’s

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5 I will define my understanding of “transformative” later in this chapter.

6 I will make a case for this statement in Chapter 2.
musicians’ support group known today as Music United. My day job before retirement was as music instructor in elementary schools. Teaching seems to be the common denominator in everything I love to do; it is the word that perhaps best defines my multifaceted ministry.

In 1990 I was privileged to join the Hymn and Worship Resource Committee charged with the production of a new hymnal, *Voices United*, for The United Church of Canada. The five-year span of that task was a period of unprecedented learning for me, in both the theology and the language of hymnody, and it sparked the profound love for songs of the church that has inspired me ever since. From opening the new book to my own congregation, my music ministry expanded outward to congregations large and small across Ontario as I was privileged to lead introductory workshops and hymn sings, answering questions on changes and on new material and, through my choice of the hymns presented, offering personal theological ruminations and insights.

It was also during this time that I served as Music Editor of the United Church’s worship journal *Gathering* for four years. As in the workshops, the submissions of amateur hymn texts to the journal led me to notice that the great majority of earnest, committed Christians, at least of the ones I met in my work, seemed perfectly content with the theology they received in Word and music, and had little interest in challenging its expression. Inclusive people-language or female images for God, for instance, were seen by many as unnecessary, even offensive. It was a long time before asking my own

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choir to change well-known texts of anthems, hymns or carols to reflect the new, more inclusive patterns of speech, already prevalent in secular society, did not cause considerable resistance. My ministry in those days included a heavy dose of teaching and persuasion; even my current ministry context is largely one of education around the songs we sing.

My growing discomfort with literalist biblical interpretation and narrowly-conceived, tradition-bound language in hymns was fuelled by reading recent books by such authors as Elaine Pagels, Gail Ramshaw, John Shelby Spong, Paul Westermeyer and Brian Wren, to name just a few. Their reasoned support for the necessity of updating theological concepts and language in order to nurture and support a contextually relevant faith struck a chord deep within me. I felt I owed it to myself and to those under my direction to educate myself about my beliefs in a way that would deepen my teaching with solid theological reflection and practices, not merely enthusiastic conviction. My Doctor of Ministry project is an attempt to address this need in a practical way.

Retired from regular church employment since 2009 I now maintain active involvement in the worship life of the Church as supply musician in various denominations, and I provide music support for the national offices of the United Church, leading the music at weekly services, at meetings and at conferences. In my home church I currently serve as chair of the Worship Committee, act as church librarian and play in the handbell ensemble. I write an occasional hymn text in response to various requests, and have several times participated in judging a hymn writing competition. But I am happiest when involved in teaching others, especially beginners, what hymns and hymn
writing are all about, and have often thought about writing a resource that can be used whenever and wherever I cannot be present myself. This thesis project aims to evaluate the workshop design that has resulted.

**The Research Problem:** hymns of yesterday and today.

Interest in the writing of new hymns has remained high and steady since the so-called “hymn explosion” in the 1960s that came about in the wake of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). Hymn writer Fred Pratt Green writes “It was the urgent need for new hymns, expressing the religious insights of today in the language of today, which produced a crop of new hymn writers in the 1960s and 1970s.” The traditional historically-burdened, male dominant language to describe both God and humanity has been increasingly critiqued in the twentieth century in terms of justice (or rather, the lack thereof) and poets, hymn writers, worship planners and clergy have gradually become sensitized toward the need for an expanded vocabulary, more inclusive imagery, and a more robust theology of God. It is gratifying to witness a conscious attempt by hymn book editors to replace problematic traditional hymns with ones that reflect new understandings.

Congregants, however, seem generally slower to feel the need for such sensitivities. This may be due in part to their encountering only twelve to sixteen hymns a year.

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9 My comments in this paper refer primarily to mainstream English-speaking Protestant churches, and specifically The United Church of Canada.
month, even with regular church attendance, thus limiting their exposure to the range of poetry in hymns, especially newer ones. It is also perhaps to be expected that human beings will frequently dislike and resist change. History suggests that resistance is often particularly strong with respect to religious conviction, which in Western context includes deeply cherished, emotive liturgical elements like hymns. As a result, in my experience all too often worshipers still prefer to sing the songs they learned a long time ago, with language and imagery that has become restricting in a postmodern context, even when there is little correlation between what they sing and what they might actually believe. If they did not, there would have been no reason except historical interest for a hymnal like *Voices United* to sometimes include two versions of certain “memory bank” hymns, one being the time-honoured traditional text and the other an edited or re-translated version. Examples are #262 “A Mighty Fortress is Our God”, #655 “All My Hope on God is Founded,” or #543 “We Give Thee but Thine Own.” In my career as church musician I observed that the traditional version is far more likely to be the one chosen for singing, and in hymn writing workshops it is still not uncommon to see God addressed primarily as Father, King, or Lord. One can hardly blame congregants or

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10 Thomas H. Troeger, *Song that Blesses Earth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 70: “There is something finished and solid about a hymnal, as though its contents were a collection of fixed pieces, as immovable as the skeletal structure of fossils. The resistance that new hymns and new hymnals encounter in many churches gives witness to this misperception of what in fact is a spirited history, often reflecting . . . the theological turbulence that has marked the church’s story.”

11 Unless otherwise stated, all examples are from *Voices United*.

12 Part of the problem, of course, rests with the English language in which pronouns have gender.
clergy as long as hymnals still include hymns like #314 “Come Now, Almighty King” or #213 “Rejoice, the Lord is King” without attractive alternatives.

The pastoral value of these and other memory-bank hymns is not in question here, nor am I advocating their purging entirely. Hymns sung by the faithful throughout Christian history form part of the memory of the Church; every generation’s witness is built on that of preceding generations. As hymn writer and theologian Thomas H. Troeger writes, “We need to hear the voices of both past and present. . . . One of the heuristic values of church hymnals is that they gather together songs of worship that span many centuries . . . enabling us to sing with the great cloud of witnesses who have preceded us. Singing the texts and music of our ancestors keeps us modest about the little slice of time during which we inhabit earth and reminds us that our contemporary values and theological idioms are as historically conditioned as those of our forebears.”

However, Maeve Heaney points out that preserving tradition is not without challenge:

Tradition, the passing on of our faith from one generation to the next, is an intrinsic part of Christian faith and doctrine, and has been from its birth—the difference is that today, the challenge is that of communicating the gospel to a generation that is in such a rapid process of change that gathering up the heritage of centuries of lived faith and tradition and passing it on seems ever more difficult.

What is critical, in my opinion, is a measure of balance with hymns that model other ways of expressing alternative or more contemporary terms, ideas or theologies that

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have become challenging on some level. A congregation’s repertoire of “heartsongs” can be kept intact while still stretching the worshipers musically, theologically and spiritually. A study of the most recently published hymn books supports this conviction: traditional Christmas carols, the ultimate “heartsongs”, are still included even though they are often based on a literal reading of the Nativity story. Likewise it would be a brave hymnal editor who decides to omit beloved classics like “How Great Thou Art”, despite its archaic language and penal atonement theology. It is a balancing act that the co-chairs of the Voices United Resource Committee recognized in voicing the hope “We trust that Voices United strikes a judicious balance between the old and the new.”

For young people today (and many not so young), language like “but naught changeth thee” (#264 “Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise”) is so far removed from everyday speech that it risks alienating them from the theological riches of the text, although the hymn lives on as a classic of its genre, much loved by the generation of their grandparents. Tradition also promotes such notions as a heaven which is located exclusively “up there” (#271 “There’s a Wideness in God’s Mercy”) or a hell (#161 “Welcome, Happy Morning”). Still another old favourite is #313, “God, Whose Almighty Word,” with its premise that without the Christian gospel’s “light” there are corners of the earth in benighted “darkness.” This brings up a further complication, the ingrained use of stereotypes, such as those associated with race or ability. The constant linking of darkness with the need for salvation or with evil in general is a particular cultural insensitivity that modern hymn writers are increasingly learning to avoid; other examples

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15 Nancy E. Hardy and Leonard Lythgoe, Preface to Voices United, viii.
are “blindness” for ignorance or stubbornness (#266 “Amazing Grace”) and “dumb” for mute.¹⁶

While there is room for honouring our rich heritage of hymnody by keeping the time-tested best examples of each genre,¹⁷ language does form and colour theology, making it imperative that the language of our congregational utterances be current, in the interest of justice and inclusivity.¹⁸ Bringing congregational song more in line with emergent theological thinking and social concerns of justice and inclusivity will also help make worship experiences more authentic, less based on nostalgia and easy sentiment. Hymn writer Shirley Erena Murray thinks that we still have a long way to go, in part because not all worship leaders so far subscribe to the urgency of the situation. “I lay a lot of responsibility at the feet of timid worship leaders who never move away from the familiar and conventional in choice of hymns. . . . The [hymn] writer’s responsibility is to

¹⁶ In Charles Wesley’s “O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing.” In Voices United, #326, “dumb” has been replaced with “ye voiceless ones,” an example of a sensitive change for the better. A particularly egregious example that exhibits what we today experience as racially and theologically prejudiced is the once-popular missionary hymn “From Greenland’s Icy Mountains,” with text by Reginald Heber (1783-1826). In it people of colour (India, Afric [sic] and Ceylon) are referred to literally as blind, benighted heathens requesting delivery “from error’s chains” by presumably white Western Christians “whose souls are lighted with wisdom from on high.” Nor are hymns in present use exempt. Hymnals that include “At the Name of Jesus [every knee shall bow, every tongue confess him]”, with text by Caroline Maria Noel (1870), or Isaac Watts’s (1719) “Jesus Shall Reign where’er the Sun [does its successive journeys run]” have included hymns whose implicit Christian triumphalism is difficult to sing in a multicultural social context.

¹⁷ Christmas carols, for example, are arguably in a class of their own; their uniquely sentimental associations with a beloved holiday and Christian festival make editing of the familiar words, or elimination entirely of archaic or theologically problematic texts, prone to popular ire. The best one can do in most cases is to insert more recent carols into the mix for balance and hope that in time these will become accepted with similar affection.

¹⁸ In fairness, Voices United, like most recently published hymnals, has made deliberate attempts to address these difficulties by including contemporary hymns whose language and imagery balance the problematic ones, and omitting hymns that could not be salvaged in a reasonable fashion.
give expression, in very many ways and on very many themes, to what is ‘the faith’ now. We desperately need connection to the actual world we inhabit!”

There is among the laity a commonly held notion that theology is the domain of experts, not theirs to question or tamper with. My workshop intends also to be a consciousness-raising exercise that challenges this perception by empowering individuals to engage in theological reflection\(^{20}\) and examine what they claim to believe, through the agency of writing original hymn texts in an encouraging guided setting. I want to share with participants the idea that everyone does theology, whether implicitly or explicitly, as Clemens Sedmak takes pains to argue.\(^{21}\) It is “not the privilege of those who are formally trained.” There is no right or wrong way to do theology, no one way; rather, “Theology is taught and written, danced and sung, sculpted and painted, even dreamed and cried.”\(^{22}\) Sedmak believes that “Being a theologian is more about who one is than what one knows.”\(^{23}\) I am comfortable with his claim that even mundane daily experiences offer the opportunity for people to practice what he calls “little theologies”; a hymn may therefore constitute one occasion for exercising such theological pondering by inviting us to embrace a potentially new perspective.

\(^{19}\) Personal e-mail correspondence with Lydia Pedersen, August 17, 2014.

\(^{20}\) I use this term in the broad sense used by Robert Kinast, who defines theological reflection as “learning from one’s experience.” Robert L. Kinast, *Let Ministry Teach* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1996), vii. The term is examined more closely in Chapter 2 of this thesis.


\(^{22}\) Ibid., 11.

\(^{23}\) Ibid., 2.
Since the time of the Reformation, theologians have encouraged congregational song as an expression of communal faith. In the English-speaking world, great hymn writers like Isaac Watts and Charles Wesley turned out thousands of new hymn texts whose two-fold purpose was to teach the faith and to allow the singing community to give voice and assent to its tenets in their own time and place. What was new in the 1960s “hymn explosion” era was the proliferation of hymn texts from the pens of non-clergy, as well as an openness to the songs of the global Church. Suddenly it seemed that anyone could, and did, write hymns, always in great sincerity though perhaps not invariably with theological accuracy, linguistic sensitivity or poetic merit. To offer training in the art of hymn writing, books and workshops were written, and the Hymn Society in the United States and Canada has been offering hymn writing workshops at its annual summer conferences for decades. New hymnals and supplements have been published by nearly every denomination in the last quarter-century, and single-author collections abound. Many churches actively promote hymn writing by funding competitions. It appears that hymn writing is alive and well.

The huge responsibility of hymn book editors, of those who select the hymns for worship, and of leaders whose decisions regarding tempo, organ registration and other accompaniment aspects influence how a hymn will be received, lies in the fact that hymns are not official articulations of the faith in the manner of creedal statements, for

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24 One of the best of these was James R. Sydnor’s *Hymns: A Congregational Study* (Carol Stream, IL: Hope Publishing Company, 1983). Jointly commissioned by the American Guild of Organists and the then Hymn Society of America, it remains to my knowledge the only such comprehensive study combining theory and praxis.

25 One has only to scan the pages of the journal *The Hymn* to see this fact amply illustrated.
instance. More and more, as hymns are written by lay poets, untrained in theology, hymns may be more representative of the author’s personal belief system rather than an ecclesiastically sanctioned one. This is not necessarily a bad thing; time and the perspective of experience tend to weed out hymns whose theology is dated or which become unacceptable for reasons of exclusive language, restricted worldview or problematic theology. Some hymns (e.g. Christmas carols) remain in the canon nonetheless, for sentimental reasons; this falls under Vogel’s category of “conservation and preservation,” making them the “privileged locus of tradition.” Tradition matters; it is the foundation for all that follows. But at least as important is the role liturgy, and especially hymns, can play in the development and progress of a theology that reflects socio-political changes, new sensitivities (e.g. we are only now seeing hymns that address LGBTQ concerns, ecological fears, issues of race, aging, disability, gender equality or interfaith dialogue, to name just a few) or the embracing of postmodern concepts of God and the global community. By naming these issues, singing of our understanding of them in the Christian context and repeating them into familiarity, we allow the liturgical act of hymn singing to both manifest our present theology and to stimulate reflection, critique, and ultimately maturing in the faith. One focus of my workshop, therefore, is an invitation to its participants to reflect on their hymn writing work in small, supportive


27 An acronym standing for Lesbian, Gay, Bi, Trans and Queer—five common sexual orientations besides Straight or Heterosexual.
groups, in the hope of addressing the problem of outdated language and imagery in hymns, and ideally arriving at new and transformative spiritual insights in the process.

In summary, my research problem has to do with hymns of yesterday and today—specifically, with the formative influence of hymnody on today’s faithful followers of Jesus. The challenge posed by many congregants in my United Church context is that they continue to live with a somewhat limited or narrow theological vocabulary and imagery, which have been formed and supported by emotional attachment to a hymn repertoire which no longer accords with current theological understandings in most of Western society. The educational value and spiritual practice of hymn writing offers one means to address such challenges.

**The Research Purpose:** hymn writing for education and reflection.

The purpose of my project, therefore, was two-fold. The practical objective was the design, administering and evaluation of a hymn-text writing workshop for laity, to teach participants the basic elements of hymn construction, stimulating awareness of both style and content, and guiding them in the technical aspects of writing a text to a well-matched existing tune. I have led, or participated in leading, such workshops in larger urban centers, most often in Toronto. Smaller churches in outlying areas have occasionally asked for such a workshop to be offered in their community as well. Construction of a teaching resource and teacher’s manual, with carefully designed sequential learning tasks, would make such a course available to regional leaders of
varying backgrounds and abilities, ensuring an accessible, well researched, pedagogically and theologically sound product.

The secondary aim of the project was to offer participants an opportunity for theological reflection and discovery, with the potential for a broadening of their theological language and imagery, with particular attention to the nature of the Divine. I expected such reflection to result from the participants’ working in small groups on shared learning assignments, and engagement with each other as they discussed their evolving hymn texts.

One major difference between most workshops and mine is duration. The typical event lasts two to three hours, an evening perhaps, while I have designed a more comprehensive module of four two-hour sessions, with a week between each session. Such a time frame allows for more in-depth study and critique, more time for group as well as individual work on the hymns, and time for private reflection as the work progresses. This last is especially critical, not only for the writing of a better quality hymn but for the luxury of going beyond the merely technical into the ontological, where growth and transformation can take place.

In my evaluation of the merits of this workshop, I hoped to find answers to the following questions:

- What demographic signs up for a hymn-writing experience?
- What do people hope to get out of the workshop?
- What do people tend to write about?
- How do United Church worshipers think of God today?
• Is the workshop well designed? What are its strengths and weaknesses?
• What changes are necessary?
• To what extent does the workshop stimulate and mediate theological reflection?
• What do people typically end up learning (about hymnody, God, themselves)?
• What kinds of transformation, if any, take place?
• How transferable would this workshop be to another setting?

**Project parameters:** according to Vella and Cranton.

To address the two-fold purpose of my study I designed a hymn-text writing workshop based on accepted best practices in adult learning, with special reference to the work of educators Jane Vella and Patricia Cranton.\(^{28}\) Four two-hour sessions, a week apart, took place in a host church. My role as leader involved acting as mentor, observer and co-learner. Each workshop session consisted of a series of sequential learning tasks listed in the participants’ workbook;\(^{29}\) these were worked as directed either in smaller group formations or as an all-class exercise. Participants continued to work on their hymn at home between sessions and were free to consult with me, as leader, by phone or email. The various elements of the workshop experience were carefully documented and


\(^{29}\) The complete workshop is found in Appendix F.
critically analyzed, through the lenses of personal interviews, participants’ journaling, questionnaires, and a focus group review session. The hymns written were artifacts which I studied for potential transformative insights gained by their writers.

Participants were self-selected volunteers recruited by word of mouth and written advertisements such as posters and church newsletters. A maximum of twelve participants allowed for the kind of intensive interaction, small-group work and evaluation inherent in the design. To keep the major variable of denominational affiliation constant, most of my participants were United Church members; the two who were not had some personal connection to the United Church.

**Basic assumptions:** the formative power of hymns.

My primary assumption feeding this project is that hymns are spiritually and theologically formative. I do not come to this conclusion in a vacuum. For example, it was clear to both Martin Luther and J.S. Bach that music, especially in hymn form, was a reliable means of teaching and forming the faith in their largely illiterate congregations. Much earlier, the church fathers wrote hymns to argue their dogmatic stance.30

In his introduction John Ambrose, managing editor of the United Church’s hymnal *Voices United*, writes: “Hymns have always had a central place in the making of Christians. For many, next to scripture, a hymnal is the church’s most important...

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30 Among these were Ambrose of Milan and Aurelius Prudentius. “Just as the followers of Arius had once used chants to promote their views . . . the Nicene party did likewise, composing hymns that affirmed the doctrine of the Trinity.” Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, Vol.1. (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 206.
sourcebook. . . . It is from hymns that many receive their primary and most enduring theological education. Hymns stay with us long after occasions of teaching and preaching fade from memory.”\footnote{“Introduction”, \textit{Voices United}.}

It is not difficult to find agreement on this principle in the literature,\footnote{See, for example, Brian Wren: “The hymn poem does theological work as valid and important as the reasoned article, lecture or book.” (Wren, \textit{Praying Twice}, 374; and Argentinean musician Pablo Sosa: “The doctrines of the church do not become faith until they are sung.” An unattributed quotation in Pablo Sosa, “Spanish American Hymnody: A Global Perspective,” \textit{The Hymnology Annual: An International Forum on the Hymn and Worship}, Vol.3, ed. Vernon Wicker (Berrien Springs, MI: Vande Vere Publishing Ltd., 1993), 60-61.} and I would add the voice of personal experience; I can still sing verbatim dozens of hymns I learned in childhood, in two languages, which informed my youthful faith with colourful mental graphics.

This leads me to a second assumption, which is perhaps less assumption than empirical fact: music has a way of setting words in the memory so that they “stick” and influence behaviour and thinking patterns. One need to look no further than tediously repetitive advertising jingles on radio or TV, or the “Alphabet Song” that helps preschoolers learn their letters. Music is a powerful aid to memory, especially when often repeated, as hymns tend to be. Neuroscientist Daniel Levitin explains that music and language share some common neural resources: “There is a close proximity of music and speech processing in the frontal and temporal lobes [of the brain].”\footnote{Daniel J. Levitin, \textit{This is Your Brain on Music} (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 127.}

I am also working with the somewhat pragmatic premise that most church people have a special affinity for traditional, older hymnody. It has often been observed that the
hymns we learn to sing in childhood are the ones that stay with us most securely throughout our adult lives. Levitin makes the interesting observation that “Memory strength is partly a function of affect—how much we care about the experience.” The positive emotional quality of the traditional hymns people tend to prefer can therefore perhaps be attributed to their having been learned at an age when life was experienced as happy and secure. Levitin also suggests the teen years as the turning point for the development of musical preference. “As adults, the music we tend to be nostalgic for, the music that feels like it is ‘our’ music, corresponds to the music we heard during those years.” As a result one might argue that our much loved hymns speak to significant moments in our lives at whatever age.

Related to this is an assumption of people’s natural resistance to change. Robert Kinast supports this conviction: “Most human beings are creatures of habit and prone to favour the familiar over the novel.” Resistance is heightened in relation to the things that evoke deeply cherished memories and emotions, as hymns tend to do. In many cases society moves more quickly than the Church in adopting such practices as inclusive language for people, or a treatment of all religious faiths as valid expressions of the search for truth. The United Church has come to recognize these and other perspectives as issues of justice but still sings many older hymns that do not reflect such contemporary values.

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34 Ibid., 197.
35 Ibid., 231.
At the same time, I assume that people of faith generally hold dear this most basic value, justice, and are therefore willing to consider new and alternative ways of thinking. I deduced, from the fact of their signing up for my workshop, that at least these particular participants were prepared to engage in open dialogue with each other and to experience fresh insights and new revelations of God’s mystery through the process of creative expression.

In the realm of sociology, broadly understood, I am operating on the premise that there is a direct relationship between income and educational attainment in the majority of cases; statistics on enrolment in institutes of higher learning consistently bear this out. This will be shown to be meaningful in the demographics of my study.

Finally, and crucially, my project was based on the assumption that people learn best by doing. While more will be said about this in the discussion of the pedagogical underpinnings of the workshop, below, this assumption has informed its overall design. In place of the traditional lecture method I drew on dialogic learning through the use of hands-on learning tasks involving cognitive, affective and psycho-motor activities.

**Definitions**

In this paper I understand a *hymn* to be a metrical poem of religious content, set to music and intended for singing by a worshiping congregation.

By *traditional* I will generally mean the entire heritage of hymnody before 1960, although in practical terms this will more frequently refer to the eighteenth and

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37 This method will be described in greater detail in Chapter 2.
nineteenth centuries which spawned a great wealth of hymns still much loved and sung in the United Church tradition, which itself is based on the musical heritage of Methodism and the social gospel movement.38

I am using the terms contemporary and postmodern often in a generally equivalent way, both applicable to the time since at least 1960.39 In hymnological terms this is the era which English-speaking church musicians have dubbed a “hymn explosion” because new hymns appeared in great numbers and in new poetic and musical styles. Contemporary will be normally used in a chronological sense, with context making clear whether I am speaking of the immediate present or the years since 1960.

While postmodern is a widely contested term, more frequently associated with the rise of the post-war period, I will use it to evoke an appreciation of more epistemological and philosophical implications—that is, to speak of the present age in which orthodoxy, long-established scientific certainties and reliance on reason have given way to an acknowledgment of doubt, to a primacy of experience and cultural context, and to thinking of God as unknowable mystery. Ursula King summarizes postmodernism as “a condition that calls everything into question.”40 It follows a period now called “modern” in which there was a tendency in theology to accommodate traditional religious teaching to reasoned thought, with a concurrent devaluing of supernatural elements. Moreover, in

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38 My use of the words “tradition” or “traditional” is not intended to have pejorative connotations.

39 Some would move the postmodern era closer to 1945, in the aftermath of the great wars. See Monty Williams, Stepping into Mystery: Four Approaches to a Spiritual Life (Toronto: Novalis Publishing Inc., 2012). See also Ursula King, Faith and Praxis in a Postmodern Age (London: Cassell, 1998).

40 King, Faith and Praxis in a Postmodern Age, 2.
modernism the Holy was frequently replaced by ideologies whose clashes led to the two world wars. Except in churches, which were full as people sought the security of dogma, God was pronounced “dead,” replaced by scientific new certainties like Einstein’s Theory of Relativity. People, societies, ideas, religions—everything was placed into a hierarchy of categories. However, in postmodern thought there is disillusionment with certainty and with all forms of authority, including that of the Church. There is a tendency to reject privileged texts and to reinterpret spiritual values.

At the same time, a creation-centered, panentheistic spirituality begins to flourish. The absence of God “open[s] up windows on a new kind of presence.” God as a “being” has become re-imagined as all-pervasive spirit common to all faiths, and the Holy is sought not in organized religion but in community, in diverse spiritual practices such as yoga, in the natural wonders of the cosmos, and within ourselves. “Postmodern ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ need not be destructive but can lead to new wisdom and humility,” writes King. As a result, so-called “liberal” churches seek to re-define God for an educated, free-thinking postmodern public that longs for spiritual experience but finds it increasingly difficult to accept traditional theological tenets and modes of expression. In their place, diversity, ambiguity, creativity and complexity tend to be celebrated in all aspects of human life.

The word spirituality is also difficult to pin down; its borders can seem somewhat ill-defined. Any definition of the term needs to be made within a cultural and

41 Ibid., 6.
42 Ibid., 14.
chronological context, and take into account whether one is referring to the spirituality of
an individual (which can carry mostly psychological associations) or of an organized
collective, e.g. the spirituality of the United Church of Canada. There is difficulty in
separating the multi-faceted concepts of spirituality and religion; they are almost
invariably, though not necessarily, linked in some manner. Between avowed atheists
and those for whom the sacred is a defining element in their spiritual life is a growing
number of people who self-identify as “spiritual but not religious.” Of this, James
Gollnick writes, “Spirituality, which has always been considered an essential part of
religion, has for many people begun to emerge as an interest no longer tied to organized
religion,” but he nevertheless considers it a significant element in healthy human
psychology. In general there seems to be a tacit assumption of some form of
relationship between spirituality and religion. For the purposes of this study I will
preference the definitions developed by Kenneth Pargament who describes religion as
“the search for significance in ways related to the sacred” and spirituality as “the search
for the sacred.”

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43 As examples, psychologist James Fowler (Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human
Development and the Quest for Meaning, 1981) equates faith development with any type of search for
existential meaning, whereas the spirituality of the United Church of Canada, as described in its latest
creedal statement A Song of Faith (2006), involves the concept of transcendence.

44 See Mary Miller Lewis, “Spirituality, Counseling, and Elderly: An Introduction to the Spiritual

45 James Gollnick, Religion and Spirituality in the Life Cycle (New York: Peter Lang Publishing
Inc., 2005), 2,3.

46 Kenneth I. Pargament, “The Psychology of Religion and Spirituality? Yes and No.” The
When I speak of personal theology, I mean the same thing—how we think of transcendence and our personal relationship to the divine. Theological reflection therefore will also assume a broad definition, for which I am indebted to Robert Kinast who thinks of theological reflection as simply “learning from one’s experience” in relation to God, a method which consists of cycles of experience, reflection on that experience, and action on the reflection.\textsuperscript{47} Practically speaking, Kinast states that theological reflection works best in a small group.\textsuperscript{48} Further, “the theoretical background is drawn from the school of process thought which is based on the work of Alfred North Whitehead.”\textsuperscript{49}

Although I sometimes use the term progressive, I recognize it to be judgmentally loaded and suggesting superiority, which is not my intention. Rather, it is meant to refer to postmodern theological orientation, the essence of which I have described above, and in contrast to my use of the word traditional.

Dialogic learning will be thoroughly explained in Chapter 2. In short, it is understood as a postmodern philosophy and method of teaching adults that takes a holistic perspective: learners learn more than teachers teach them, by bringing their own experience to bear on learning tasks which engage small groups of individuals through dialogue. The critical reflection involved in such interaction can lead to what is known as

\textsuperscript{47} Kinast, \textit{Let Ministry Teach}, vii.

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., ix.

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., viii. More will be said in Chapter 2 of Whitehead’s influence on process thinking in pedagogy and religion. How theological reflection meshes with my study of hymn text writing will also be developed more fully in Chapter 2.
transformative learning—a revision of specific beliefs or of one’s entire worldview.\textsuperscript{50}

*Transformative learning theory* is based on the idea that we construct personal meaning from our experiences and validate that through discussion with others.\textsuperscript{51}

Finally, *transformation* will be used in the simple sense of change, be that a result of the acquisition of new factual knowledge or the gaining of new spiritual insights. Whether small or life-changing, I understand all degrees of transformation and change to be significant for faith.

Together, these key definitions form a kind of taxonomy of epistemology and methodology, a vocabulary of understanding and process, which is meant to aid in the findings of this study. They are tools for the analysis of the impact of hymns and hymn-writing on faith.

**Delimitations**

Because of the comprehensiveness of the word “theology” and the potential for an excess of unfocused data, this study concentrated on the participants’ understanding of the nature of the Holy, or of what most of them called God. This included the naming and imaging of God, the issues around gender language for God, and the involvement of God in human affairs. Even where God is not directly named as such, is understood in a non-

\textsuperscript{50} *Transformative learning* is defined by Patricia Cranton as “the development of revised assumptions, premises, ways of interpreting experience or perspectives on the world by critical self-reflection.” Patricia Cranton, *Understanding and Promoting Transformative Learning* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994), xii.

orthodox way (as spirit, energy of the cosmos, etc.), or is even denied completely, I considered this to be theology, i.e. how one thinks about ultimate concerns.

The workshop was not designed to teach the composition of new tunes; it restricts itself to the creation of hymn texts. While most people can write words, for better or worse, the conventions and notation of music are a separate language which requires specialized training. That is not to say that the musical elements of hymns, so vital for their interpretation, were not taken into consideration. An appreciation of the role of the tune in carrying the words formed a major portion of the study and the experience of the participants. Those gifted in the discipline of composition were certainly not discouraged from exercising this addition in their hymn writing, but it was expected that most participants would be writing texts to existing, familiar tunes.

I tried to approach the project with an open mind, prepared to make startling discoveries or none at all about the way hymn text writing can effect a change in people’s thinking about theological issues, about hymns as expressions of their spirituality, or perhaps just life in general. One thing this workshop definitely did not intend was to be an exercise in conversion to my or anyone else’s theological views, nor a narrow definition of what a “good” hymn is. Certainly high standards of writing and content were to be encouraged, but all efforts and beliefs would be applauded and treated with respect. Participants would be coming from many different sets of life experiences, biblical literacy and spiritual development, and no one’s opinions or writing skill would be deemed less valuable than another’s. To the contrary—much learning can take place in a respectable dialogue between individuals who hold contrasting views. Henri Nouwen
frames it in terms of hospitality: “Hospitality is not an invitation to adopt the lifestyle of
the host, but the gift of a chance for the guest to find his own.”52 The workshop’s
watchword was “enrichment” rather than “replacement;” unless any replacement was
voluntary and a consequence of the learning process.

My own background, and the context within which I exercise musical ministry,
set boundaries around this study that will likely make it less useful to some readers or
situations than to others. As a white, well-educated, classically-trained member of a
thriving mainstream congregation in Canada, I am gearing the majority of my
observations and remarks toward professional peers working in similar environments. I
cannot, for example, assume that this study would be of equal interest to the worship
planners in a small black, evangelical congregation, to name just one alternate scenario.
While certain conclusions may be applicable to all, the target consumers of this workshop
are church leaders working within a United Church context.

The workshop was also specifically designed for lay learners. Participation by
theologically trained clergy, church musicians or experienced hymn writers was a
concern in that it might negatively impact the comfort level of the participants, making
them more self-conscious and hesitant to offer their thoughts and work under scrutiny.
The dichotomy would also add a significant variable (amateur vs. professional) to the
data mix, something I tried to avoid.

52 Henri Nouwen, Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life (New York:
Doubleday, 1975), 51.
Limitations

With a maximum participant number of twelve for manageability, data collected were unlikely to be representative of all United Church congregants. United Church congregations especially have a wide range of theological expression ranging from fairly conservative orthodoxy to emotive evangelical worship. Working in an urban context, I imagined that my participants’ responses might be more theologically literate than if I were to conduct the study in, say, a small rural church. Differences encountered in the participants’ responses could also be attributable to variances such as age, gender, socio-economic status, education, and theological formation; reducing the number of variables was another reason for keeping the sample as homogeneous as possible.

The workshop used as its main resources the two most recent hymnals of the United Church, *Voices United* (1996) and *More Voices* (2007), resources familiar to both the participants and myself. While this narrowed the range of hymns that could be examined and worked with, it was necessary due to time restraints and the physical impracticality of making other hymnals available. For a basic, non-scholarly course I considered these two books more than sufficient.

Because of the risk of researcher bias, and the possibility of responses being selectively geared toward pleasing me personally, I solicited participants from a United Church congregation other than my own. I hoped that this would help maximize the reliability of data. Nevertheless, there was no good way to measure to what degree

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53 This is a personal, descriptive hypothesis and not meant to suggest a value judgment, that one is superior to the other. Repeated administration of the workshop, in different locales, would help to affirm or deny the hypothesis; as such, it was outside the scope of this thesis.
responses were accurate reflections and not just superficial approximations of each
individual’s genuine innermost thoughts and feelings. I was aware of the need to resist
the temptation to read more into a response than was there, simply to produce meaningful
or interesting data.

Lack of time is a perennial limitation in teaching, as it was in this workshop.
Following repeated administration of the course, teaching materials will gradually
crystalize into definite priorities and extraneous activities that take up too much time will
be weeded out in due course. Such priorities will always depend to some degree on the
particular needs of each participant group.

Another limitation is that of the leader. I for one do not have years of systematic
teaching, nor do I expect most potential future leaders using this workshop to
be thus equipped; many will probably be church musicians like myself. It may seem
presumptuous for me to offer “theological reflection” as a constituent of the workshop;
intuition would suggest that it would require a trained, clerical professional. But
according to Robert Schreiter, we are all theologians in that we all think in some way
about the things that give our lives meaning. “Anyone speaking of God in a reflective
manner is somehow involved in the theological process.”54 Stephen Bevans would agree:
“When theology is conceived in terms of expressing one’s present experience in terms of
one’s faith, the question arises whether ordinary people, people who are in touch with
everyday life . . . are not the real theologians—with the trained professionals serving in

an auxiliary role.” Robert Kinast suggests that theological reflection works best not alone but in a small group setting. “A group can keep an individual from distorting or misreading an experience.” Theological reflection concerns itself with religious content, but anyone is capable of pondering their experience of sacred matters from their own unique point of view, be that clerical or lay. I know from personal experience that a theologically trained professional may even be counter-productive. “The guardians of normative theology and the institutions in which it resides can be very resistant to theological claims which come from experience, especially when they critique or interpret established theology.” For the purposes of this workshop, therefore, I believe the ideal leader is one who understands the principles of spiritual reflection as well as those underlying dialogic learning, and has the personal qualities to engage participants optimally.

It is important to recognize the limitations of the hymns used as the basis and models for the study. There is an obvious bias toward a text-bound, liberal, educated culture, one heavily influenced for centuries by its history of colonial supremacy which is only now being challenged. It is to be hoped that with the inclusion in Western mainstream hymnals of more global hymns, hymns that have arisen out of liberation theology, hymns that give voice to the experience of those who have never known privilege, the tone and content of our congregational songs will gradually become

57 Ibid., xiii.
considerably more outward looking and inclusive of all creation. While this study does not address these issues, per se, it is hoped that such a workshop can be, at best, open to such possibilities.

Summary

In my lifelong career as church musician and educator I have developed a particular interest in hymnody. My thesis is built on the claim that hymns have a powerful potential for the shaping of individual belief systems and for enabling transformative experiences in people who participate regularly in communal worship. I have designed a workshop for novice hymn writers, to explore to what extent worshipers in the United Church of Canada are still thinking theologically in language and imagery prevalent before the postmodern era, and whether the creative activity of writing a hymn text within a guided learning situation is likely to stimulate theological reflection and a richer vocabulary of thinking about God.

The workshop design is based on contemporary transformative learning techniques, in particular those developed by adult educators Jane Vella and Patricia Cranton. The practical objective of this study is an evaluation of the workshop itself as a pedagogical tool; evaluation of it as a vehicle for encouraging new spiritual insights is its theological focus.
Chapter 2 Conceptual Framework

“Rooted and grounded in your love…”58

Preface

Having set the workshop in its ministry context and described my hopes for it, I now turn to the theological and the pedagogical underpinnings for the project. In this chapter I will define faith as a lifelong search for meaning and understanding, and discuss the role of hymns in shaping faith. I will suggest praxis as the basic model for this study, and review literature that treats creative efforts as a form of spiritual practice. I will explain the concept of transformative learning and how it is a cornerstone for my workshop design. My frame of reference all along will be that of process theology as pioneered by the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947), in which experience is synonymous with the continuous creative process of becoming rather than being, suggesting that the journey is at least as important as its destination.59 This will allow me to support my project’s pedagogical foundations, based primarily on the works of Jane Vella and Patricia Cranton, whose insights are in turn rooted in the adult learning theories of Brazilian educator Paolo Freire (1921-1997). These are variously known as “dialogic learning” or “quantum learning.” Vella’s twelve principles of effective learning, as well as associated strategies for effective evaluation, will inform my discussion of this


59 Whitehead’s ideas as they relate to theological reflection are examined in Kinast, Let Ministry Teach, 17-21. According to Kinast, theological reflection is itself an experience (19).
method. The chapter will conclude with an integration of the theological and the theoretical aspects of my study, in the context of theological reflection.

**Theological foundations**

**Faith formation**

Pastor, musician and theologian Don Saliers is one of many specialists in the field of church music to suggest that “If you ask ordinary worshipers what has shaped their theological convictions about God, Jesus, Church and the Christian life, they will most likely refer to hymns.” Theologian Gail Ramshaw agrees: “Hymns are the primary way that the liturgical year and theological imagery are appropriated by the laity.” History tells us that Martin Luther wrote paraphrases of the catechism in the form of hymns; these he first taught to the children of the congregation who then sang and taught them to their mostly illiterate elders. Later, Isaac Watts and Charles Wesley wrote their thousands of hymns in a similar effort to make the scriptures their congregants heard preached easier to understand, and more immediate to assimilate. Albert van den Heuvel observes: “It is the hymns, repeated over and over again, which form the container of much of our faith. They are probably in our age the only confessional documents, which we learn by heart. As such, they have taken the place of our catechisms. . . . There is ample literature

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about the great formative influence of the hymns of a tradition on its members."62

Kenneth Hull speaks for church musicians when he says,

Many church musicians believe that it makes a significant and even crucial difference what we sing—that what we sing together in worship shapes who we become as believers. Musicians know that music can affect us at our deepest levels, and some believe that worshipers are formed differently depending on their liturgical musical diet. How we nourish our faith musically determines at least in part what kind of Christians we become.63

In classical theological tradition, faith is not a stagnant phenomenon but a lifelong search for deeper comprehension, a continuous engagement with the mystery of God. Augustine wrote, “I believe in order that I may understand.”64 Anselm is credited with the succinct phrase “faith seeking understanding,” by which he meant that believers ought to be inquirers “not for the sake of attaining to faith by means of reason but that they may be gladdened by understanding and meditating on those things that they believe.”65 Daniel Migliore points out that therein lies the difference between fideism, or blind assent, and faith: the latter never stops seeking and asking, even when answers are elusive.66 The primitive beliefs of childhood are shaped by our experiences as we age and by our

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65 St. Anselm: Prologium; Monologium; An Appendix in Behalf of the Fool by Gaunilon; and Cur Deus Homo. Trans. Sidney Norton Deane. (La Salle, ILL: Open Court Publishing Co., 1951), 178; 33.

reflecting on these, both in private and in community. It seems evident from the decline in attendance at religious services that many worshipers are no longer satisfied with the dogmatic answers of past eras; our rapidly changing world presents each generation with new and unique realities in which to search for meaning and hope. History has shown repeatedly the terrible consequences of living by an unquestioning ideology. The need for continual examination of one’s beliefs, and the sources of those beliefs, is at the heart of my workshop.

This task of pondering ultimate concerns is not restricted to theologians and clergy; since we all think about these things, we all do theology, and we do it from childhood. In daily life we are shaped and guided by our social context, family teachings, our reading and our interactions with others, and in church by what we are taught first in church school and later pick up in worship services from liturgy, sermon, and the hymns we sing. Those who choose the hymns regularly for worship have great responsibility, since their decisions can help shape, overtly or subliminally, an entire congregation’s theological mindset.

To be sure, the lyrics of hymns have their limitations. Their brevity, and the selective constraints of poetic devices such as rhyme and metaphor, often make them better vehicles for expressing the experience of faith than for reasoning them out or teaching them. They are expressions of theology, not systematic theology. On the other

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67 The phrase “ultimate concerns” is borrowed from theologian Paul Tillich, who uses it to describe that which encompasses the highest meaning or value in one’s life. For many this is religion, but it may be a secular goal such as money or power. See Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper, 1957), 1-4; also Paul Tillich *Systematic Theology*, vol.1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 12, 123, 234.
hand, one can also argue that it is the very brevity of a hymn that makes it valuable, since the hymn writer is forced to distill out the essence of a theological perspective. Brian Wren suggests that hymns function in large part as *interpreters* of theological concepts, but that this is doing theology in its own right.\(^68\)

Leading musician-theologians such as Paul Westermeyer, Don Saliers, Brian Wren and John Bell\(^69\) consider the church musician’s work no less a calling and a ministry than that of the clergy, demanding the same accountability toward the congregation’s spiritual health. In hymn singing, the two disciplines meld into one as words and music jointly engage the intellect and, through the particular power of music, approach the realm of the transcendent. This is part of what makes hymns such important elements of worship: we end up believing what we sing. The classic liturgical rule, “*lex orandi, lex credendi,*” sums up this dynamic well, finding apt expression in hymns.\(^70\) We may react to a sermon with indifference or critique; we may tune out during spoken prayers or anthems sung by the choir. Theologian Barbara Brown Taylor admits to this when she writes “Sung words affect me in ways that said words do not. Where sermons slide off, hymns sink in.”\(^71\) The muscular engagement in the act of singing, heightened

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\(^{68}\) Wren, *Praying Twice*, 352.


\(^{70}\) Latin for “the law of prayer (is, founds or establishes) the law of belief.” While debate continues regarding the precise relationship of these two “laws,” there is general agreement that it speaks to the fact that one’s worship is a foundational source in shaping one’s beliefs. It refers to an ancient Christian principle suggesting that one’s worship practices shape one’s beliefs.

physical awareness because we generally stand to sing, and especially the emotional impact of an attractive tune or a catchy rhythm combine to make the text, and thus the entire hymn, a powerfully influential entity. It is what Dwight Vogel calls a primary experience when we allow the hymn writer as liturgist to speak both to us and, through our singing, for us.72

Brian Wren argues that congregational song is indeed indispensable: it is “by nature corporate, corporeal, and inclusive; at its best it is creedal, ecclesial, inspirational and evangelical. Each characteristic is theologically important.”73 Wren admits that other worship activities have these various attributes to some degree and in a variety of configurations, but he argues that hymns are unique in their consistent encompassing of all of them, which is why he claims that congregational singing is so necessary to Christian public worship.74 It is also why I have always considered the leadership of

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72 Vogel, ed. Primary Sources of Liturgical Theology, 8.

73 Wren, Praying Twice, 84: “Congregational singing is corporate because it enacts the theological statement ‘We are one in Christ.’ It is corporeal because it is a kinesthetic experience, a physical activity involving the whole body.” Speaking from another discipline, neuroscientist Daniel Levitin (This is Your Brain on Music, 174,175) describes the intimate association between the brain’s cerebellum, whose function is the coordination of bodily movements, and music: it becomes activated when we hear music, especially music we like and are emotionally attached to; it does not respond in the same way to noise or other forms of less meaningful sound. Wren continues: Hymn singing is also inclusive; it welcomes and indeed expects every person present to join their voice to that of the congregation, regardless of vocal quality. By creedal Wren means that hymns give expression to communal memory (91): “The words of familiar songs help shape a congregation’s theology.” Hymns are ecclesial in that they link the singers with the wider faith community, a catholic body of believers both past and present. They are inspirational in their proven ability to comfort, uplift, exhort, and enable the singer to experience a closeness with God. Finally, hymns are evangelical because their fervour can demonstrate to the unbeliever the power of the Christian gospel.

74 Ibid., 97.
hymns my most important duty as a church musician: hymns and hymn leadership are central instruments of a well-formed and well-rounded faith.

### Biblical mandate

Three biblical texts have been of particular formative influence in my theology of the ministry of music. The first is the exhortation to “sing to the Lord a new song!” found repeatedly in the psalms and in the Book of Revelation (14:3). However one interprets these passages, the implied momentum is towards reinvigoration of perspective and contextual relevance. Original ways of expressing even outdated statements of faith make us sit up and take notice, just as a new tune to familiar words can let us hear the text in a completely fresh way; the tune adds a whole new layer of interpretation to the text. As the tenets of theology change, moulded by modern scientific knowledge and biblical scholarship, so the words we sing must surely reflect those adaptations if what we sing is to be at all meaningful for us in worship. Contemporary hymn writer Shirley Erena Murray, when asked what she considers some of the most urgently needed, under-represented topics in hymnody, replied,

> Of course, ecological concerns and a more urgent voice in eco-theology. But immediately challenging to me is the rapid progress of science and technology, with acquired wisdom to acknowledge its benefits as well as its threats. . . . A subject the church seems unable to deal with well is human sexuality; not just LGBTQ people. . . . I think we still need hymns to address loneliness and first-person meditation. . . . I am interested in new ideas to do with mysticism, the numinous, and evolution in many forms.\(^{75}\)

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\(^{75}\) Shirley Erena Murray, e-mail interview with Lydia Pedersen, August 17, 2014.
The second passage that has had a deep influence on me in musical ministry is Jesus’s Parable of the Talents (Mt. 25:14-30) which speaks of responsible stewardship of God-given gifts. Having been given sensitivity toward words and music, and a natural affinity for teaching, I have striven all my life to use these in the service of God to the best of my ability. “Good enough” is never an option, and working toward the best possible rate of return on God’s investment is a non-negotiable imperative for me.

The teaching component of my ministry finds support in Paul’s letter to the Corinthians (14:15): “I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also.” I appropriate these words to mean that teaching an unexamined faith based merely on tradition and sentiment is being irresponsible. If we earnestly believe that only our best is a worthy tribute to the Holy then the intellectual components of our worship should be of equal import with the spiritual or the aesthetic. To be sure, there will be pastoral occasions when a particular hymn is chosen for its appealing tune, inviting everyone into full-throated participation. But to settle for a trite text, or one that perhaps uses strongly masculine language and imagery, runs the risk of not honouring the One to whom we are singing. Such a song can still be redeemed in part through intentional teaching, pointing out the weaknesses in the text so that the singers are at least sensitized to its deficiencies. In short, sensitive contextuality, faithful stewardship and intellectual engagement in music leadership are rooted in deep biblical principles.
Justice

United Church theology considers the appreciation of human diversity, hospitality toward all others, interfaith dialogue, and a more inclusive reading of Scripture, matters of justice. Brian Wren defines a just hymn lyric as one that “reflects God’s valuation of the potential and dignity of human beings.”\(^{76}\) No matter how much we love older hymns, a good test of their faithfulness to the principles of justice is to ask whether the congregation can sing them with integrity as much as with pleasure.

A comparison between the indexes of its two most recent hymnals is one of the exercises in my workshop, and it is interesting to see the extent to which hymns in *Voices United* emphasize traditional content with an exclusionary and patriarchal flavour (e.g. Church: Triumphant; God: Kingdom, Majesty; Satan; Hell; Sin) while *More Voices*, published only eleven years later, has listings such as Diversity, Aging, Abuse, First Nations Sunday, to name just a few, and no fewer than eight hymns acknowledging interfaith spirituality. It is considerably more careful with its gendered-language usage, especially for God. Many of the hymns in *More Voices* do not mention “God” at all, instead alluding to a Creator by singing of creation and humanity’s responsibility. One hymn even refers to creation as Gaia, earth-mother.\(^{77}\) A new United Church hymnal put together today would no doubt add hymns that honour the equal rights of persons of different genders, sexual orientations, economic situation or ethnic origin; others that deal with the extremes of terrorism, ecological disasters as a result of global warming, the

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\(^{76}\) Wren, *Praying Twice*, 179.

\(^{77}\) “O Beautiful Gaia”, MV 41.
widening gap between rich and poor in the global economy, strengthening of relationships with indigenous peoples, and similar pressing current concerns. Recently published hymnals of other denominations have already done so. However, there are still many United congregations that do not have *More Voices* in their pews and have therefore not yet been exposed to its more recent broadening theological landscape, at least not in their hymns; it is particularly congregants of such churches that my workshop seeks to address.

Justice is a central Judeo-Christian theological and ethical principle which needs to be reflected in our hymnody in contemporary terms if we are to give voice to the depth and breadth of our faith.

**Language and metaphor**

As much as those educated in such things may enjoy the unique cadence and vocabulary of poetry from a bygone era, the fact is that for optimal communication it is preferable to use the linguistic currency of the day, the vernacular. This is especially important if one hopes to speak to and with young people, whose patience with anything they consider old-fashioned can be notoriously thin, and with the unchurched, who lack basic familiarity with scriptural archetypes, proverbs, parables, symbols and metaphors. For the Church to be seen and experienced as relevant, its language needs to accord with that outside its walls. Thus the archaic “thee,” “shalt” and the like have largely been replaced by their modern equivalents, and gender equality is reflected in the replacing of such words as “mankind” with “humanity,” or “brotherhood” with “community” or
“partnership.” A few liturgically inviolable classics such as the Lord’s Prayer or the Trinitarian formula of Father, Son and Holy Spirit remain, but even these are frequently being edited or paraphrased into contemporary parlance for optional use.78

The language of hymns needs also to be inclusive, both to satisfy the demands of justice and fairness toward every member of the faith community, local as well as global, and to avoid being accidentally insensitive or offensive by using names or stereotypes that are now recognized as inappropriate, evoking dimensions of racism or ableism. Words such as “crippled,” “dumb,” “light,” or “benighted” have become problematic for that reason, although it still comes as a surprise to hymn writers who have never given this any thought and who may protest that surely everyone knows what is meant.

It does not help that traditional English usage in reference to God has implied that God is male. God may be beyond gender, but most efforts to avoid pronouns for God tend to come across as awkward or stilted. One device hymn writers of today use to skirt the issue is to employ second-person address, i.e. speaking to God rather than about God, since “you” is neutral. Another is a conscious incorporation of a balanced range of gender-specific images for God in a hymn, or at least, in worship planning, an attempt to select hymns with gender-balanced language when referring to God.

Metaphors are like the proverbial picture that is worth a thousand words: a well-chosen one can carry great depths of suggestion and meaning by organizing our thinking.

78 For example, Voices United includes five variants of the Lord’s Prayer, and the Trinity is at times invoked as Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer by worship leaders (though not at the font of baptism, for reasons of ecumenical recognition).
The fresher and more unexpected it is, the greater will be its impact by introducing a completely new insight.\textsuperscript{79} Grand biblical metaphors like Christ the King have become weakened though overuse, predictability and abuse.\textsuperscript{80} How much more thought-provoking is a hymn like S. Curtis Tufts’s “I Am the Dream” in which Christ is named in turn as dreamer, rhyme, tune, silence, now, and yearning, among other images.\textsuperscript{81} Thus, one exercise in the workshop aims to stimulate the imaginative search for new images to balance or replace the traditional or outworn. “In doing so, the hymn-poem does theological work as valid and important as the reasoned article, lecture or book.”\textsuperscript{82} One source for new metaphors is the world in which we live. Although it remains deeply cherished, the Twenty-third Psalm is increasingly hard for city dwellers of the third millennium to identify with. Its images of sheep, shepherds, tables laid in the presence of enemies, overflowing cups and the like need elucidation before the psalm’s meaning is clear to urbanites whose world is that of high-rise buildings, traffic and restaurants.\textsuperscript{83}

Tim Sensing puts it clearly: “If structures and languages are adopted due to a former generation’s adherence to them, the gap between what is believed and what is

\textsuperscript{79} Wren, \textit{Praying Twice}, 373; 181.

\textsuperscript{80} This particular metaphor also does not resonate in societies such as the United States, where monarchy is a concept without positive applied association.

\textsuperscript{81} “I Am the Dream,” words by S. Curtis Tufts (2005), MV 106.

\textsuperscript{82} Wren, \textit{Praying Twice}, 374.

\textsuperscript{83} One intentional resource aimed at redressing this problem is Nancy Hardy’s \textit{Worship in the City: Prayers and Songs for Urban Settings} (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 2015).
practiced will widen.”

To rephrase this for our purposes, one can similarly speak of the problem of “the gap between what is believed and what is sung.”

A further linguistic difficulty in many hymns is pointed out by William Smith, who in “From Scripture to Congregational Song” reflects that “It is in the church’s interest to see that what the congregation sings in no way conflicts with the church’s understanding of the Scriptures. . . . Worship leaders need to remember that what congregations are asked to sing is something of vital importance, a text in which language matters. They must also be aware that a given hymn, perhaps in spite of initial appearances, may not say what they want said.”

He discusses four examples of such dissonance, concluding with a suggested remedy for problematic hymns: calling specific attention to the perceived discrepancies and so using them as teaching tools.

In summary, theological language, language of and about God and God’s people, is the language of metaphor, which is especially the currency of hymnody. Critical theological reflection on what we sing will take metaphor seriously as a means of our experience of God’s revelation in our time.

**Praxis as underlying model**

In *Six Models of Contextual Theology*, Stephen Bevans includes the Praxis Model, the one which most closely informs my project since it is eminently practical, based on

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hands-on experience followed by reflection and renewed action. Often associated with Latin American liberation theology, it has developed more widely into a general method that takes to heart the scriptural prophetic exhortations of Isaiah, Amos, and the New Testament emphasis that faith without works is dead (e.g. James 1:22, “Be ye doers of the word and not hearers only”). It presupposes that to know God fully is possible only when we act on our beliefs; or as Bevans puts it, it is a process of “faith seeking intelligent action.” This calls all people into doing theology, not just professional theologians. Indeed, Bevans makes it clear that “A theology that is not in some way rooted in praxis cannot be considered an adequate theology today.” Or as Robert Kinast summarizes it, “Praxis is the intended outcome of all theological reflection.”

Praxis consists of an energetic spiral-like process of action – reflection – action. One performs an act, reflects on its meaning and significance in the light of Christian understanding and behaviour, enacts any revisions that arise from the reflection, and a new cycle begins. As applied to my project, participants in the workshop wrote a hymn whose contents derived from life experience; individually and in small groups they then reflected on what they had written, guided by workshop exercises, discussions and questions. What they learned was in turn strictly practical (poetic devices like meter or rhyme, for instance), theoretical (what is a hymn?), or philosophical (inclusive names for

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86 Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*. The six models he describes are the Translation, Anthropological, Praxis, Synthetic, Transcendental, and Countercultural Models.

87 Ibid., 73.

88 Ibid., 77.

89 Kinast, *Let Ministry Teach*, 16.
God.) Any of these qualified as a type of personal transformation, and as the learnings and reflections influenced further action (editing their hymn for inclusivity, perhaps) and led to a new round of thinking and doing (e.g. choosing an appropriate hymn for the next Worship meeting), the participants can be said to have engaged in Praxis theology.

Discussing the role of the leader in a praxis-based intervention such as my workshop, Tim Sensing gets directly at its purpose: “[In the praxis model] the D.Min. [Doctor of Ministry] student functions as a resident contextual theologian who is initiating a ministry intervention within a particular context in order to address critically a discrete problem, so that the community will continue its journey of becoming like Christ for the sake of the world.”\(^{90}\) The journey is the critical element, not the outcome. “Theological process takes precedence over product.”\(^{91}\) For my purposes, this means that a polished hymn is not the intended result of each participant’s efforts; rather, it is what transpires and evolves out of their journey of learning, discussion, reflection and transformation—about which the resulting hymn text is a symbol. “The process of growth continually reshapes understanding and identity. Theology is a critical activity, a faith that seeks understanding in practice.”\(^{92}\) The dynamic of praxis is the dynamic content of this approach to theology.

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\(^{90}\) Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, xix.

\(^{91}\) Ibid., xxix.

\(^{92}\) Ibid., xxxi.
Creativity as spiritual practice

The arts have been a vital part of Christian tradition from its beginning. They are incorporated in worship to varying degrees, depending on cultural context. Through artistic endeavours the inexpressible is given form. Theologian Karen Armstrong has spoken of her own discovery of theology itself as an art form:

Increasingly I was coming to see that theology, like religion itself, was really an art form. In every tradition, I was discovering people turning to art when they tried to express or evoke a religious experience: to painting, music, architecture, dance or poetry. They rarely attempted to define their apprehension of the divine in logical discourse or in the scientific language of hard fact. Like all art, theology is an attempt to express the inexpressible.  

Sally Armour Wotton calls God “creativity itself. To play with earthly substance, movement or words is to be in dialogue with God. Through art we ask our deepest questions, attempting to peel back the known to discover the unknown.”

Not only do the arts give us a means of questioning or expressing profound concepts, merely engaging in them can be an act of transformation. “We are transformed by what we create,” writes Keri Wehlander, “and in turn our creation may become a source of transformation for others.” The connection between this insight and my workshop is direct: I was investigating what kinds of change or transformation took place in the participants as a result of creative hymn text writing, and in my conclusions will

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suggest ways in which the hymns may act as transformative catalysts in the participants’ church community as well. Throughout her book Wehlander emphasizes the concept of “re-texting”—creatively re-appropriating the scripture narrative and liturgy to fit a contemporary context and thus often more surely engaging the young and the unchurched.

Artistic effort becomes transformative spiritual practice when it touches the depths of faith. “Artists speak a language of holiness. . . . When this speaking of holy things through the arts meets a context of faith, remarkable possibilities open up. Spirits are nourished, new insights are embodied, communities are widened, our faith is deepened, and we are moved by glimpses of divine mystery.”96 Ruth Illman and Alan Smith elucidate further: “The arts engage their partners in a back-and-forth, to-and-fro dialogue in a way that is more transparent than the typical intellectual distancing of contemporary theology and philosophy. . . . Doing theology from the perspective of the arts engages one in the important work of theology, in a way that is more practical—and therefore more transformative than other contemporary approaches to theology.”97

The act of writing as a spiritual exercise is explored in Sarah Stockton’s book “A Pen and a Path.”98 In it she posits that writing is a means of re-defining one’s relationship with God, and a vehicle for transforming one’s experience of God through one’s choice

96 Ibid.,9.
of words. The economy of words that characterizes a poem can further sharpen any transformative awareness or insight. Given the added emotional dimension of melody, a hymn is therefore of particular value as a tool for spiritual inquiry.

By opening its practitioners to the possibilities of mystery and surprise, encouraging engagement with intuitive ways of knowing, and acting as a means of self-discovery, the creative art of hymn text writing holds many opportunities for transformation.

Theoretical and Pedagogical Foundations

Active learning

To Confucius (or possibly one of his students) is attributed the adage “I hear and I forget; I see and I remember; I do, and I understand.” Regardless of the accuracy of the source, studies have proved time and again that it is true for both children and adults: we learn best by doing. Doing, or active learning, can take a variety of forms in individuals, depending on their inborn learning style preferences, as Howard Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences suggests. But the bottom line is that optimal learning


100 Figures vary slightly but are within a close enough range to be meaningful: Barbara Bruce in Seven Ways of Teaching the Bible to Adults (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000) places hearing success at 15%, seeing at 50% and doing at 90%. Jane Vella (quoted in Leona M. English and Marie A Gillen, ed., Addressing the Spiritual Dimensions of Adult Learning. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., 2000) suggests figures of 20%, 40%, and 80% respectively. Other research I have come across is in agreement with these general statistics.
and retention will be a result of active engagement with a topic of interest to the learner rather than passive listening to a teacher’s imparting of information in monologue style—as was the old method of teaching in schools and adult education. Active, self-initiated and self-directed learning is the over-arching design principle in my workshop.

**Adult learning**

Learning in a formal sense was long considered something one did almost exclusively in childhood, with perhaps some on-the-job training as necessary in adulthood. In the latter part of the twentieth century, as health and longevity improved for many, a new phenomenon known as *elderlearning* appeared, the subject of a study by Lois Lamdin. Reluctantly setting a criterion of fifty-five as “old,” Lamdin researched the dramatic return of mature adults to arenas of learning, including university lectures aimed at seniors, community courses often titled “Learning Unlimited,” library presentations, and adult education offerings in church settings. Interestingly, she found that next to libraries, churches were the most frequently mentioned locales, and highly social, print-based courses in class or workshop settings the greatly preferred format (68%).

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103 Ibid., 78.
In Lamdin’s study of typical older learners a profile emerged which leaned toward being female, claiming Caucasian and Asian heritage, having higher than average educational histories, and being in good health. Music and literature were among the interests most frequently cited, and the number one reason for their return to the classroom was “the joy of learning” (80%), followed by “search for meaning and wisdom” (37%). These statistics would seem to be supported by the demographics involved in my workshop, as will be seen in Chapter 3.\(^\text{104}\) In addition, a recurring theme among older adults is their gravitation toward self-generated, self-directed learning: “I want to learn but no longer want to be taught.”\(^\text{105}\) One of the questions I asked of my project was to what extent Lamdin’s mature-learner profile would show up in my participants also, since consistency will inform the design of future workshops.

**Transformative learning**

Jack Mezirow, a trailblazer in transformative learning theory, states that “Transformative learning has become the dominant teaching paradigm discussed within the field of adult education.”\(^\text{106}\) As has already been noted, since all learning involves a newness in one’s thinking, it may be considered a form of transformation. In a certain

\(^{104}\)Lamdin’s research was conducted in the United States and is therefore representative of only that study demographic.

\(^{105}\) Lamdin, *Elderlearning*, 118.

sense, everything we humans do throughout life is learning.\textsuperscript{107} Traditionally leaders taught facts, skills, doctrines and beliefs. In our information era, with its overload of data, teaching has become instead the task of equipping learners with the tools they require to find their own answers to whatever it is they need or want to learn. Beyond the simple acquisition of a new skill or new factual knowledge, the concept of \textit{transformative learning} adds the more profound element of a change in one’s belief or value system. From this perspective, “learning involves conversion (\textit{metanoia}); a transformation in perspective, a change in the mental maps through which we make sense of reality.”\textsuperscript{108}

Educator Patricia Cranton defines transformative learning as “a process by which previously uncritically assimilated assumptions, beliefs, values and perspectives are questioned and thereby become more open, permeable, and better justified.”\textsuperscript{109} When learning, followed by critical reflection, in turn leads to a broader, deeper or different perspective, transformative learning can be said to have taken place. This is particularly true for adult learning; Cranton makes the point that “One of the primary differences between education for adults and education for children is that children are “forming”

\textsuperscript{107} Thomas R. Hawkins, \textit{The Learning Congregation: A New Vision of Leadership} (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 26. Hawkins makes a distinction between animals, whose instincts can be retrained, and human beings who learn. The essence of learning, he says, is “the ongoing organization and reorganization of experience” (27); he applies this even to infants who, for example, must learn to fall asleep. Their repeated, predictable experience around the bedtime ritual is gradually transformed into “patterns of meaning” that guide future behaviour. Adult learning, of course, has the added feature of comprehension, based on chronological perspective and a faculty for critical self-reflection.

\textsuperscript{108} Ibid., 21.

\textsuperscript{109} Patrica Cranton, in her foreword to Hoggan, Simpson and Stuckey, \textit{Creative Expression in Transformative Learning}, vii.
and adults are “transforming;”\textsuperscript{110} children can be said to be schooled while adults are educated. A critical element of transformative learning is the process of self-reflection, and it takes an adult mind, with its more structured base of experience, to engage in assessment of one’s assumptions and worldview. “Values are not necessarily changed, but are examined—their source is identified and they are accepted and justified or revised or possibly rejected.”\textsuperscript{111}

Cranton acknowledges that change can be “frightening and threatening” for adults.\textsuperscript{112} Potential alteration of one’s value system, or a need to revise deeply-rooted assumptions, can challenge personal identity and self-esteem, which is why it is crucial for the educational setting to be one of support and acceptance. Both the leader and the co-learners have a major role to play in the validation of everyone’s sense of self; only under those conditions can transformative learning truly happen.\textsuperscript{113}

In discussing the roles of the educator, Cranton suggests that they fall into three categories. For traditional other-directed learning, roles include being the expert on the topic, the planner of the learning event, and the actual instructor where necessary. Self-directed learning requires the leader to be a resource, facilitator, manager, model and mentor. And since ideally the leader is a co-learner with the students, he or she will also be a reformer, reflection practitioner, and researcher.\textsuperscript{114} The leader’s role will vary

\textsuperscript{110} Patricia Cranton, \textit{Working with Adult Learners} (Toronto: Wall and Emerson Inc., 1992), 145.
\textsuperscript{111} Ibid., 146.
\textsuperscript{112} Cranton, \textit{Understanding and Promoting Transformative Learning}, 85.
\textsuperscript{113} Ibid., 86.
\textsuperscript{114} Ibid., 67.
according to the particular learning task; for instance, in my workshop I act as resource in
the exercise of matching hymns with historical periods, and as facilitator in the role play.
The leader’s most important role is that of empowerment of the learners; in that it leads to
transformation it “is the component of adult education that separates it from
pedagogy.”\textsuperscript{115}

This understanding of transformative learning is closely linked to process
philosophy, the brainchild of philosopher Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947) whose
innovative theory influenced many disciplines, including education and theology. In
short, it states that all human endeavour is in flux, always in an organic state of becoming
rather than being. Nothing is fixed permanently, and all things are interconnected. For
theology this means that “God participates in every moment of reality, luring every event
to God’s purposes.”\textsuperscript{116} Process education focuses on the individual learner as the one to
initiate and direct his or her own learning; “Valuable intellectual development is self-
development.”\textsuperscript{117}

In process thinking, all things are related meaningfully, and all learning happens
in a continuous cycle of action and reflection on that action. Kinast comments on this
principle, the essence of the concept of praxis, by arguing that each draws life from the
other, and neither can exist independently of the other. “Action is always embodied

\textsuperscript{115} Ibid., 138.

\textsuperscript{116} Mary E. M. Moore, \textit{Teaching from the Heart: Theology and Educational Method}

thought; thought is always incipient action." The concept of perfection is therefore foreign to process theory; while it may be a goal to strive towards, it is one that is never attained. What this means for a learning situation like my workshop is that the quality of the hymns written and the level of skill brought to it are largely irrelevant. Creative expression is a form of pilgrimage that can lead the learner off to explore all sorts of side roads that one happens upon, all of them valid in the total experience of the journey. Moore considers that “theology and education are not really two separate worlds.” What ultimately matters is encounter with the Divine. Poetry writing is said to be a particularly significant act of self-discovery, but it needs to be practiced in an environment free of judgment, or expectations of what constitutes a “good poem.” I take from this the assumption that the very act of writing a hymn text, regardless of its practical usefulness, is therefore transformative, and an experience of transformative learning.

Creativity and transformation

There is consistent support for the symbiotic relationship between creativity and transformation. Wehlander writes, “We are transformed by what we create, and in turn

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121 Paintner and Beckman, *Awakening the Creative Spirit*, 112.
our creation may become a source of transformation for others.”

She upholds the small-group method of learning: “Creative responses to problems are more likely to arise from smaller groups of people who are not bound by layers of formal structures.”

She comes very close to the heart of my thesis when she adds, “Artists speak a language of holiness… when this speaking of holy things through the arts meets a context of faith, remarkable possibilities open up. Spirits are nourished, new insights are embodied, communities are widened, our faith is deepened, and we are moved by glimpses of divine mystery.”

Hoggan also relates creative writing and group discussions with transformative learning. He shows how metaphors and images speak in non-linguistic ways, engendering feelings that can add to enlightenment or learning. Translating visual images into language then helps to set them more permanently in the mind, promoting both creative and critical thinking.

Hoggan says that the incorporation of feelings or emotions into the learning process makes it more effective. This would support what has already been stated, that hymns are particularly potent shapers of religious learning. Further, he suggests the means by which creative writing elicits latent knowledge: “Writing is a powerful way for people to give voice to previously unrecognized knowledge. Writing can also reveal one’s assumptions, even those of which they are unaware. Sometimes it

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123 Ibid., 8.
124 Ibid., 9.
125 Hoggan, Simpson and Stuckey, *Creative Expression in Transformative Learning*, 66.
becomes its own learning experience, as new understandings are gained during the creation and articulation processes.”

Artistic expression, Hoggan concludes, is not the domain of a few talented individuals but is open to all, regardless of writing proficiency. Again, this is an underlying understanding in my workshop. “Critical creativity includes, but does not focus on, the artistically gifted. The focus is not on an end product; rather, the process is the key to insight, learning, and knowledge creation.” All this links theology with art forms, which include the writing of poetry and hence hymn texts, and supports my expectation regarding creativity and transformation—namely, that through the agency of a hymn-text writing workshop participants might be encouraged to examine their faith, ask their deepest questions and discover new ways of naming and knowing God.

Jane Vella and “quantum thinking”

The essences of creative transformative learning, postmodern thought and process theory come together in the teaching strategies developed by adult educator Jane Vella. To learn is to grow, whether this involves mathematics, languages, or writing a hymn. To learn well, however, in a way that is permanent and holds the potential for a transformative experience, depends on an effective teaching method. Trained in traditional lecture-style teaching methods, I became converted to this approach that relies

126 Ibid., 68.
127 Ibid., 107.
128 Vella, Learning to Listen, Learning to Teach.
on the power of dialogue between adults, usually in small groupings, to elicit learning instead of imparting it; to invite, rather than to show. “Many modern educators place an interactive dimension at the heart of adult learning experience.”129 Learners are the subjects of their learning rather than objects of transferred knowledge; their need to know drives the design of specific learning tasks, and their interactions with each other are as important as those with their leader.

As has already been observed, the teacher’s role is that of program designer, resource person, mentor, co-learner, and facilitator as the course unfolds. There is an organic mutuality in this process whereby students and leader learn from each other and are accountable to each other for whatever is achieved. Linda Vogel thinks of educators as “midwives,” assisting others to give birth to new ideas and skills, empowering them to explore alternative ways of thinking, developing autonomy, and honouring diversity in approaches.130 That is not to deny the occasional need for the leader to teach in the traditional sense of transferring information, neither is it intended to suppress content by overemphasizing process. Nevertheless, the “learning task” method “engages the learner at the level of critical thought and critical feeling.”131 A learning task, for Vella, “is a way to structure dialogue. It is an open question, put to members of a small group who have

129 R.E. Wickett, in English and Gillen, ed., Addressing the Spiritual Dimensions of Adult Learning, 40.

130 Linda J. Vogel, in English and Gillen, ed., Addressing the Spiritual Dimensions of Adult Learning, 24.

131 Jane Vella, Taking Learning to Task: Creative Strategies for Teaching Adults (San Francisco: John Wiley and Sons, 2001), xiii.
been given all the resources they need to respond. . . . [It is] a way of ensuring engagement of learners with new content.”

Vella’s method has been used in numerous cross-cultural situations, showing it to be practical and transferable, a quality that is important in a workshop design meant to be used on more than one occasion and in different settings. By quantum thinking she refers to looking at the world in a new way, just as the science of quantum physics was a new paradigm that followed upon Newtonian mechanics. It is a dynamic, integrated approach that concerns itself with energy and spontaneity rather than mechanical certainty, and spirituality in place of materialism. It understands that everything is connected, that the whole is greater than its parts, and that the learners ultimately learn more than they are taught. The best questions are considered to be open ones, avoiding either/or modes which shut down creative thinking. Uncertainty is honoured as new contexts continually change the picture and help to determine reality in a unique way for every individual. Participation in the educational process is mutual; student and teacher learn from each other, each constructing their own reality according to their context. Further, there is an emphasis on the energy that learning demands; learning tasks need to be carefully constructed to maintain such energy and avoid tedium. Quantum thinking is the opposite of absolutism. For hymn writing, it translates into a kind of liberalism, the personal freedom to interpret what was once unassailable religious dogma.

132 Ibid., 17.

133 Vella, Learning to Listen, Learning to Teach, 30, 31.

134 While such freedom of interpretation is more likely to apply to liberally-oriented congregants, those whose theological stance tends toward the conservative would be no less welcome as participants in
In constructing my workshop I took into account the Twelve Principles which Vella lists as necessary to optimal adult education praxis:¹³⁵ Leona English further condenses these into three primary guiding principles for the construction of a learning experience, which I paraphrase as follows:¹³⁶

1. Good dialogue, which results from careful construction of the specific learning tasks. Each task should involve the learners’ cognitive, affective and psychomotor faculties. In other words, a task will be richer and more learning effective if those involved are invested emotionally as well as intellectually, and better yet if there is a motor, or doing, component – drawing, posting notes on a chart, role play, etc.

¹³⁵ Ibd., 32-35. These principles are:

2. Safety: ensuring a learning environment that is non-judgmental, with a high level of trust between students and leader.
3. Sound relationships: equality in relationships; no power imbalance favouring the leader.
4. Sequence and reinforcement: well-designed programming and follow-up. Effective dialogue begins with good set-up questions.
5. Praxis: action followed by reflection. This involves both inductive and deductive learning.
6. Respect for the learners as autonomous decision makers: teachers must allow students to lead, and not do for them what they can do for themselves.
7. Holistic learning: involving the whole person; exercises involve cognitive, affective, and psychomotor functions.
8. Immediacy: making new learning relevant to students’ real-life situations.
9. Clear roles: the teacher accepts with humility the role of co-learner while maintaining leadership.
10. Teamwork: everyone’s input contributes to the learning of the whole group.
11. Engagement: active and enthusiastic involvement in the learning process.

¹³⁶ English and Gillen, ed., *Addressing the Spiritual Dimensions of Adult Learning*. 

2. Respect for the learners. This involves knowing them even before they begin, through personal contact or a questionnaire discerning their needs and interests. A workshop that is not relevant in their daily lives becomes a theoretical exercise rather than a potentially transforming one. Respect also means reciprocity; the teacher avoids the hazards of a power relationship by assuming the role of vulnerable co-learner. The assumption is that everyone has things of value to share, leading to greater self-confidence on the part of the learners and a surer self-awareness born of the supportive network of peers and the leader.

3. Accountability between leader and learners. A Learning Covenant listing achievement-based objectives tells the learners what they can expect to gain from the workshop, while promising the leader their faithful attendance, attention, and confidentiality. Outcomes are shared: in my case, the hymns produced will be sung at some future occasion, making the writing exercise more meaningful. A post-workshop group discussion gives participants insight into any growth or learnings that have taken place.

An indispensable component of good dialogic teaching is evaluation of the program’s success. Vella suggests that a comprehensive evaluation involves three levels: \textit{learning}, \textit{transfer}, and \textit{impact}.\footnote{Jane Vella, Paula Berardinelli, and Jim Burrow, \textit{How Do They Know They Know? Evaluating Adult Learning} (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998), 22.} The first is an assessment of new skills or knowledge resulting from the program. In the case of my workshop, such learning is evident in the mere fact of the hymns written by the participants; they speak for themselves. Vella likes
to answer the question “How do they know they know?” with the simple reply, “Because they just did it!”

Transfer refers to the application of learning to other situations, after the completion of the learning program. Transfer would be in evidence, for example, if participants were to write a new hymn, knew how to choose a suitable tune for their text, appreciated information on a page in the hymnal that had previously been mysterious to them, or made use of the index to find an appropriate opening hymn for a church meeting, to suggest a few hypothetical scenarios.

By impact Vella means a lasting effect of the learning on an individual. While this workshop’s limited duration means that evaluation of long-term impact on the participants is not practical, the individuals themselves will know whether they have acquired a greater appreciation for hymns, their construction and theological content, or have perhaps experienced new “Aha!” moments at unexpected times thanks to their involvement in the workshop. Then Vella’s premise will have been actualized: that learning is a transformation of the self, far beyond the grasping of a set of new facts. “Knowing anything is an opportunity for metanoia, a deeper realization of one’s meaning and purpose.”

The interactive method of adult education, championed by Vella who describes its mental processes as “quantum thinking,” is the method on which I have based the design of my workshop.

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139 Vella, in English and Gillen, ed., Addressing the Spiritual Dimensions of Adult Learning, 10.
Theological Reflection

A crucial element in this method of learning is the incorporation of time for reflection following the praxis component. Carl Jung surmised that “whoever reflects upon himself meets the frontiers of the unconscious, which holds all he needs to know.” Reflecting together can be even more constructive, and in my evaluation features of the workshop I have included both individual reflection in the form of questionnaires and the expectation of journaling, as well as a group reflection exercise.

I do not have the systematic theological training of ordained clergy, nor do I expect most potential future leaders who might use my workshop to be thus equipped; most will probably be church musicians. It may therefore seem presumptuous to offer “theological reflection” as a major constituent of the course. But as Kinast defines it, theological reflection is simply the journey through the sequence of personal experience, reflection on that experience, and consequent action, undergirded by practical techniques and learning theory. All quantum learning involves reflection; the major difference in theological reflection is its concern with God, faith, and/or spiritual concerns. Anyone is capable of pondering their experience of religious matters from their own unique point of view, be they cleric or lay. A crucial difference between secular and theological reflection is that the latter may influence and change individuals at a particularly profound level where knowledge ends and faith begins; they discover such intangible insights as a greater purpose and deeper meaning in their lives. If a workshop participant

141 Kinast, Let Ministry Teach, viii.
were to join the Worship Committee of his or her church in order to have a say in the selection of more appropriate hymns in services, that would be one example of action-oriented change related directly to the process of theological reflection stimulated in the workshop.

The last word here belongs to Sensing, who takes the discussion of theological reflection a step further, from the individual to its influence on an entire community of faith.

The local theology of a community is always in flux and, hopefully, in the process of becoming a mature articulation of their understanding in the life of God. Practical theology enhances the critical correlation between experience and theology so that both these activities will occur more often. . . . When the congregational situation, religious experience and other resources are brought together in a dialogical approach, future discernment, actions and ultimately transformation are possible.\textsuperscript{142}

Summary

Hymns play an important role in the formation of religious faith. As such, they also hold great potential for sensitizing worshipers to issues of justice within a contemporary context. The creative art of writing hymns can open individuals to opportunities for experiencing new revelations of God and divine purpose in the world. The learning process involved, based on the interactive strategies developed by educators Patricia Cranton and Jane Vella, offers the expectation of personal transformation, of both knowledge and spiritual insight. It is the foundation for both the philosophy and the design behind my hymn-text writing workshop.

\textsuperscript{142} Sensing, \textit{Qualitative Research}, xvi.
Chapter 3  Action-In-Ministry

“Receive and open for review the work we do, the word we preach, and school us as we teach and learn, in careful thought and truthful speech.” 143

Preface

As noted in Chapter 2, Bevans’ dynamic Praxis Model underlies both the purpose for, and the design of, the workshop which is the action-in-ministry of this research project.144 Revolving around the potential for social change, or, more accurately in this case, for personal transformation, it blends words with concrete doing in a continuous spiral of action—reflection—action. One purpose of this study was to examine whether the activity of writing a hymn under guidance and in a communal setting might lead to personal theological reflection in the participants, resulting in new insights and perhaps consequent revisions of the hymns to accommodate those insights. The second purpose of the study was the design, implementation and evaluation of a hymn writing workshop for laity that would enable such a continuum of learning and reflection. This chapter describes the workshop, the venue where it took place, the participants, and the methodologies of data collection and evaluation employed.

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144 Bevans, Models of Contextual Theology, Chapter 6.
Project description

Workshop format

Four sessions, two hours each and spaced one week apart, took place in a volunteer host church. I met with the clergy and music director two months in advance to obtain written permission to carry out this exercise on their premises, to explain in detail its purpose and what it involved, and to check the room offered and the physical set-up required.\textsuperscript{145} One copy of the workshop outline and worksheets was left with the minister for reference. A written description of the project’s purpose and my biographical sketch was left as well, to assist the church staff in recruiting participants. Recruitment was left to church staff because they are familiar with their congregants in a way I am not, and could decide on the best vehicle(s) for inviting interested people, be that in person, by newsletter, bulletin board notices or other means.

Several weeks prior to the first session I collected names, phone numbers and e-mail addresses of the participants from the church staff. With a set of questions for consistency as guide, I interviewed each participant to get to know them a bit, learn about their expectations, and answer any questions they may have had.\textsuperscript{146} This established a warm relationship even before meeting in person and gave me and the participants a chance to learn about each other, something for which there would be little time during

\textsuperscript{145} Many larger churches have an extensive programming schedule, so that sufficient advance notice is a requirement. The original permission forms, as well as any other documents that would identify places or individuals, are in the possession of the researcher; appended copies have such information hidden to safeguard anonymity.

\textsuperscript{146} See Appendix C.
the sessions themselves. It also allowed me to make adjustments to the content of the sessions where it was deemed advantageous, for an optimal fit with the group. The telephone interview was followed up by a mailing to each participant. Included in this was a friendly letter of welcome, a second letter describing the workshop’s purpose and contents, ending with a tear-off section for informed consent, and an intake questionnaire. The latter served as a baseline set of reflections for comparison with a longer questionnaire at the conclusion of the workshop. Participants were asked to return both the consent form and the completed questionnaire before the first session.

At each session I came early to set up the space, put out refreshments, and chat with participants as they arrived. At the beginning of the first session, participants were given a three-ring binder with the work sheets for Session 1 already inserted; each subsequent session began with distribution of the work sheets for that session and a review of the homework assignments. A five minute break halfway through each session allowed for stretching, refreshments, and some informal chatting.

The first three sessions were designed in accordance with contemporary principles for adult learning, with special emphasis on the work of Jane Vella. Each session blended instruction by the leader with learning exercises, or “tasks”, set out in the work

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147 This is an important element in the workshop design, which relies so heavily on interpersonal relationships. Participants who feel their leader already knows them as unique personalities, having taken time to learn about them, will begin the course with a sense of trust in the process and a feeling of safety.

148 For instance, the language of several learning tasks was overly simple for this highly educated group and could have been received as patronizing. That I could have done a better job of this will be evident in Chapter 4.

149 See Appendix D, D1 and D2.

150 Vella’s principles have been listed in Chapter 2.
binder. As required, the tasks were shared by the group as a whole or performed in smaller groupings of two or three. Participants were free to choose their own partners and encouraged to switch these from time to time. I circulated freely to offer advice and encouragement and to keep track of time; each task or set of tasks was assigned a specific number of minutes for its completion. I brought a pair of finger cymbals to gently signal the end of each task.

In the week between sessions, participants were asked to complete certain “homework” assignments, based on the work that had been done, and to return these to me for comment or assistance. The actual thinking about and writing of the hymns was to be done at home. Because one couple had to be out of town toward the end of the workshop, and their participation was crucial to the integrity of the study, I reluctantly provided for a three week break between Sessions 3 and 4.

The minister and the music director of the host church were invited to attend the fourth session, to hear and comment on the hymns that had been produced and to discuss possible scenarios for sharing the new hymns with the wider church community. They, as well as each workshop participant, were given a collection of the hymns to keep, bound in a report cover. The session concluded with an audio-recorded focus group interview to pull together learnings and to provide me with their personal evaluation of the workshop experience.\footnote{151} Finally, a feedback questionnaire was distributed in stamped, self-
addressed envelopes; everyone was asked to fill it out thoughtfully and return it either as hard copy or by e-mail.¹⁵²

I followed up with an emailed thank-you note to the participants, promising to keep in touch and let them review material in the thesis report that pertained to them.

The workshop design includes an optional fifth session for a public celebration of the new hymns. This might take the form of a structured Hymn Sing, an informal sing-through party, or any number of creative ways to introduce the group’s work to their church community.

**Workshop content**

Succeeding learning tasks in the workshop were designed to build on the lessons of work already accomplished. The complete workshop is included in the Appendix;¹⁵³ here I offer a summary of the learning objectives.

**Session 1 - Introduction of the participants**

Agreement on a class learning covenant

Definition of the term “hymn”

Exploration of hymn characteristics in historical eras

Comparison of the thematic indexes of *Voices United* and *More Voices*

Discussion of hymns inadequately represented in these hymnals

¹⁵² See Appendix I.

¹⁵³ See Appendix F.
Session 2 - Exploration of the various indexes in hymnals
   Exercises to understand meter and accents
   Learning to pair texts with appropriate tunes
   Tentative sharing of proposed hymn topics

Session 3 - Singing of each writer’s initial version
   Discussion of rhyme and writing “traps”
   Discussion of appropriate “people language”
   Discussion of “God language” and images of the sacred

Session 4 - Communal singing of each completed hymn
   Brainstorming ideas for public celebration of the hymns
   Audio-recorded feedback group interview

Venue

Eden Valley United is a beautiful stone building in an affluent sector of Toronto.\textsuperscript{154} It has wonderful stained glass windows, both old and some recent commissions. A large pipe organ and a grand piano are in excellent shape and the building’s nave and several floors of offices, meeting rooms and activity centers are immaculately cared for. According to one member of the workshop group it is an “old

\textsuperscript{154} Like the names of the participants and church staff, the name of the church has been changed to preserve anonymity and confidentiality.
Congregationalist church, not too invested in the national [United] church.” The congregation is predominantly Caucasian, professional, and elderly, although it has a fairly healthy contingent of young families. A look into its annual report reveals a church with a strong social consciousness expressed in a wide array of outreach programs. The church has a history of excellence in preaching and music.

The room where the first three sessions were held was a large open space on the top floor, with high windows to let in natural light. When darkness fell, several ceiling fixtures provided sufficient, if not overly bright, illumination. A carpet on the floor mellowed the resonance in the room. Four five-foot tables were set up in a semi-circle, with three chairs at each. On the tables were writing implements, paper, sticky notes, and copies of the two hymnal resources used, *Voices United* and *More Voices*, one for every participant. The tables faced an upright piano and a music-stand “lectern” for my use. After the first session I realized that having my back to the group while playing the piano was extremely awkward; one of the participants graciously offered to bring in her electric keyboard for subsequent classes. This made it easier for me to lead the singing and address the group while playing, a far more satisfactory arrangement. The room was removed from other church activities and there was a sense of quiet calm that made it easy to hear everyone and to concentrate.

The fourth session was moved to a pleasant parlour-like area on the main floor, with cushioned seating facing a grand piano. The more elegant ambiance and better instrument enhanced the feeling of celebration as everyone’s hymn was sung and commented upon.
Workshop participants

One of the key elements of this workshop is the make-up of the participants. One can imagine a very different set of data emerging from, for example, a group of young writers in a congregation that emphasizes biblical scholarship and sings mostly recently composed hymns, and from a set of older participants perhaps, in a more traditional church whose hymn repertoire leans on “golden oldies.” The decision was taken out of my hands when a friend and colleague approached the administration of Eden Valley, where he worshiped, and they responded with enthusiasm to his suggestion that they be the host church for this project. I worried at first that this congregation might already be so up-to-date in its theological conceptual thinking that my workshop might be of little interest to them and would yield data of marginal consequence. However, an eager volunteer church was difficult to reject; it handily solved the problem of finding participants. I left the actual recruiting to the church staff. In the end, the relative randomness of the selection may have served the project well, insofar as it spoke to its viability in any context.

The enthusiastic reception by the minister at Eden Valley led me to anticipate having to choose from among a great crowd of eager hymn writers; this did not materialize. Nevertheless we ended up with eleven self-selected persons, which came

155 I had no strong preference; any constituent group would bring its own challenges and insights, although I did hypothesize that more traditionally oriented worshipers might be more likely to meet new ideas and consequently undergo a more radical transformation in their thinking. Based on this assumption of how a church’s culture would be likely to influence its corporate theology and hymnody, I would have chosen the latter congregation with which to work. However, it seemed of significance that, despite their obvious resources, the congregation of Eden Valley did not have the most recent United Church hymnal in their pews. Not knowing how to interpret this, I was prepared for surprises.
close to my desired maximum number of twelve.\footnote{This number is based on the researcher’s personal experience with similar hymn-writing groups. Many more, and the quality of interaction with each participant is compromised; fewer limits the opportunities for exchanging ideas with a good sampling of different personalities and opinions. Tim Sensing (Qualitative Research, 121) also cites eight to twelve as an “average optimum group size.”} There was a satisfactory variety of ages and stages among them, a good balance of gender and an interesting mix of employment areas. I noted that most of them were in key leadership positions at the church and active in one or more of its programs; this led me to wonder whether there was correlation between leadership types and people who enjoy learning. All but one said they came out of genuine personal interest, but they varied widely in their experience with writing and musical knowledge.

The role of the participants was two-fold: to act as subjects testing the workshop design, and to engage in spiritual reflection based on their learning and on their hymn text writing, providing me with feedback throughout the process. My role was that of leader and mentor, observer and co-learner.

### Participant profiles

**William A.**  William was a cheerful, middle-aged (51-70) member of Eden Valley United Church, where he served as co-chair of the Worship and Music Committee. Raised in the United Church but married to an Anglican, he spent fifteen years worshiping in an Episcopalian church in New York. A semi-retired investment banker, he had no background in music but admitted to writing poetry before, and to having recently
taken some continuing education writing courses at university. He declared himself “very comfortable writing.”

**John B.** John was an engaging retired dentist and university lecturer, one of the more senior participants of the group (71+). His wife, Susan, and daughter Julia were in the study group as well. John’s writing experience had been limited to “writing doggerel,” and he had no musical training. He reported with a smile that the minister “twisted his arm” to encourage his participation, but once signed up he was enthusiastic and eager to “gain insights into church music.”

**Susan B.** Although in the senior age bracket (71+), Susan still worked as a part-time social worker in the adoption field. She sang in the choir at Eden Valley and was also encouraged to participate in the workshop by the minister. She was not clear what the workshop was about, except that it dealt with church music. She had studied piano, but had no experience with poetry writing or musical composition.

**Julia B.** Julia (early 30’s) was encouraged by her parents to attend the workshop with them. She owned to a particular love of music and saw her world through a musical lens (“God is music to me”). She was interested in “the whole process of writing a hymn.” Julia had studied culinary arts management and worked in several high-end restaurants.

**Kenneth C.** Kenneth (51-70) was an accomplished trumpeter. At Eden Valley he was actively involved, both musically and as a member of the worship planning team. His creative ideas have taken the form of hymn texts and very innovative musicals (e.g. a liturgically themed musical based on the music of a well-known rock band). Formerly on
the staff of the United Church’s General Council, Kenneth was now employed in the financial and technology sector. It was through his enthusiastic recommendation that Eden Valley became the host church for this workshop project.

**Isobel C.** Married to Kenneth C., Isobel (51-70) joined the workshop group at her husband’s suggestion. Introspective and thoughtful, she worked as a counsellor, with a particular interest in, and empathy for, clients who are struggling with mental health issues and depression. Isobel had a background that included music and writing; she was open to a creative endeavour “different from my day job.”

**Joan D.** One of the younger participants, Joan (31-50) came to Eden Valley three years ago, after meeting its minister on a building project in Haiti. She was raised in a devout Roman Catholic family and had once thought about missionary work in Africa. She was employed as an executive in the non-profit sector. Music and singing were very important in her upbringing and faith development. At Eden Valley she had acted as vice-chair of the Community Outreach committee and had participated in various volunteer activities. She was keenly involved in a study series on Thomas Merton at church, loved writing poetry and was intrigued by this opportunity to “explore my musical interests again.” She played the piano and was learning the guitar.

**Alex E.** Alex (51-70) had expended considerable energy in service to her church over the past fifteen years. Before retirement she worked in the trade union movement. At Eden Valley at various times she had been Clerk of Session, chair of the Outreach and the Ministry and Personnel committees, and was currently co-chair of Worship and Music with William A. With Sloan G., whom she persuaded to participate in this
workshop, Alex sang enthusiastically in the choir. She had no experience at poetry writing but was eager to learn more about hymns, especially their texts, which she claimed to often pay little attention to, favouring the music.

**Arija F.** Like Kenneth C., Arija (31-50) was a regular contributor to the worship life of Eden Valley; for the past two years she had composed both the music and texts of songs for occasional services. This interest was the catalyst for her joining the study, which she felt “might be a good fit.” Arija’s husband was currently a divinity student at Emmanuel College (United Church of Canada). Although she referred to herself as a musician, Arija was in training to become a psychotherapist. Until her second pregnancy she was actively involved with the social justice group at Eden Valley; now that she was a busy mother her contributions to church life were mainly focused on music.

**Sloan G.** Sloan (31-50) was the gregarious managing director of an advertising firm, work which she enjoyed for its creative aspects and the potential to “stretch boundaries.” A bubbly personality, Sloan appreciated the power of music, whether it was through popular music or singing in the church choir beside Alex E. She was married to a staff member on the United Church’s General Council; they had two young adult children.

**Joy H.** Joy was a young mother (31-50) of two. Her husband worked as a pastor in a large multicultural Baptist church. Joy was raised in the United Church, but found herself drawn toward a more evangelical tradition in her late teens while struggling with severe depression issues; these have continued to plague her. Although not a member of Eden Valley, and attending a Baptist church, Joy was interested in the creative nature of
the study. Since there was room in the group, and her unique profile had the potential for turning up some interesting comparative data, she was included.

Resources

To run this workshop requires a minimum of resources. Besides the room furnishings described above, there should be a copy of both hymnals, *Voices United* and *More Voices*, for every participant. The leader provides a work binder for everyone, paper, writing implements and sticky notes. The leader also provides an assortment of simple, healthy refreshments, napkins and recyclable disposable cups.

Methodology

Description

The nature of my research, focused as it is on evaluating both a program design and its potential transformative effect(s) on the participants in that program, suggested that a *multi-methods* methodology was the most appropriate. Sensing speaks of *action research*, since this type of study is dependent on the engagement of the participants.\(^{157}\) The multi-methods approach he advocates “allows various perspectives to engage in a critical dialogue that leads to several sets of rich data, resulting in the possibility for deeper understandings. And those understandings can be communicated to readers in

\(^{157}\) Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 52.
such a way that makes the information useful to others.” Further, he explains “I simply advocate a form of action research that employs a multi-methods approach within community located in a specific setting and is intended to bring transformation.” This sums up my intentions very closely. He likens his categorization to that of William Myers “Pro-active Research Method.” Because this workshop focused on the essence of a single experience shared by several individuals, based its data analysis strategy on significant spoken and written textual statements, and had a component of educational philosophy, its primary tools could be classified as belonging to phenomenology, although there were elements of case study in the analysis of the program design and the use of multiple data sources. Perhaps the most useful umbrella term for my workshop might be *Phenomenological Action-research*, with case study and narrative tools, and a multi-methods approach to data collection.

**Data collection**

To maximize useful information gathered for the purpose of reliable evaluation of both the workshop and its effect on the participants, my data sources fell into four main categories:

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158 Ibid., 54.
159 Ibid., 54.
161 I understand the term *phenomenology* to refer to a value-free, descriptive method of inquiry that investigates an event such as a workshop. Ernest Springer, quoted in Sensing (*Qualitative Research*, 56), sums up my methodology accurately in saying, “Formally, then, action research, in its most effective forms, is phenomenological (focusing on people’s actual lived experience/reality), interpretive (focusing on their interpretation of acts and activities), and hermeneutic (incorporating the meaning people make of events in their lives).”
• Direct observation: These were written notes I made during the workshop itself, as I wandered about the room watching participants work. I noted behaviours, interactions, attendance, questions; and wrote notes to myself after each session to remind myself of how it had unfolded. Included were any unexpected comments or occurrences, and thoughts that occurred to me as a result of these observations. Due to the need for continuous attention to the program and the participants, my notes made during each session were brief and sketchy; recalling the session either the same evening or the next day, I was able to be more complete and thoughtful in my observations.

• Participant responses: These were the major source for my data, and included telephone interviews, questionnaires, reflective journaling, e-mail correspondence with me, and an audio-recorded feedback interview with the entire group, which I transcribed. Not all participants chose to, or were able to, respond in every case; it was disappointing that journaling was an activity only a few ended up doing, despite my weekly reminders. On the other hand, correspondence by e-mail turned out to be an unexpectedly rich source of data.

• Artifact analysis: This was my in-depth examination of the hymn texts each participant produced. Having assembled a coding structure to help me perform meaningful text analysis, I looked for repeated themes, words or phrases that might suggest patterns of thought, either individual or collective.
Follow-up: I continued to have occasion for interacting with participants after the conclusion of the workshop sessions, to ask for clarification or augmentation of data or to remind several of them of documents yet to be sent to me. These conversations yielded some additional data.

Evaluation

Like the workshop design itself, my evaluation procedures and description had a strong narrative component, following closely those championed by Jane Vella. While it was always gratifying to discover shared patterns of thought, even words or phrases that participants used in common, since these strengthened an analytical argument, the unique psychic make-up and experience of each individual made such commonality rare. My report of the effect of the workshop, both in terms of its structure and in transformative learning or spiritual insights that were gained, is therefore predominantly in the shape of stories around each person’s individual experience. This makes each story a kind of mini case history, involving both factual observation and interpretative thick description of all pertinent data. Data, gathered in the various forms outlined above, served as the source for evaluating both factual learning and spiritual insights gained in the process. At the same time they also directly or indirectly comment on the efficacy of the program itself.

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162 Vella, Berardinelli, and Burrow, How Do They Know They Know?

163 I base my understanding of thick description on the discussion of its parameters in Sensing, Qualitative Research, 195-196. The term is originally rooted in the work of Clifford Geertz (The Interpretation of Cultures, 1973), who based it on the philosophy of Gilbert Rye.
My analysis procedure included text-coding of materials both written and spoken, where the latter was able to be transcribed verbatim from an audio-recorded focus group session. I was looking for units of meaning, searching for corroborating statements in personal interviews and questionnaires, and testing for validity by running each participant’s results past them for acknowledgement once these were tabulated. Methodological triangulation—increasing the likelihood of veracity by cross-checking the different methods by which data was collected—was assisted by three lenses through which the data was reviewed and evaluated, namely mine as researcher, the participants’ when I shared their data with them, and the reader of my thesis as it was being written.¹⁶⁴

In looking for themes and patterns in my data, I also tried to remain sensitive to what was not said or written, and to any perceived inconsistencies, or slippage.

**Summary**

In this chapter I have described the parameters of my project: the workshop format and content, its venue, profiles of the participants, and the physical resources that were employed. I discussed my methodology and the reasoning behind my classifying the study as Phenomenological Action-research. I listed the various sources and means of data collection, and explained my evaluation criteria and procedures, including the basis for triangulation.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 75. Sensing considers the participants’ review often the most valuable source of evaluation.
Chapter 4 Analysis And Evaluation

“No sudden rending of the veil of clay . . .”165

Preface

In this chapter I will take the reader on a journey of discovery by describing the unfolding workshop experience. Facts and figures, descriptions and on-the-spot analyses will be interwoven with observations and comments by the participants and myself, the researcher, as we engaged in a mutual process of learning and reflection. Since the design of the workshop is so closely linked to its impact on the participants, this format of combining description with related evaluation seemed to me to have the most integrity, methodologically—to be the most effective way to track the evolution of both the project design and its results.

Following an evaluation of the preliminary activities and documentation leading up to the actual workshop, I will describe, analyze and evaluate each of the four sessions in turn. Documents will be introduced as they become relevant, and conflated with each other in service of the narrative. Detailed thematic coding of each document has preceded its use.

The chapter will close with a summation of results: what I learned about the construction of this particular workshop, what the participants learned about hymn writing, and what, in the process, we all learned about ourselves.

Preliminaries

Once Eden Valley United had been established as voluntary host church, I met with the minister and the music director to lay out the program, its goals and parameters, and to answer their questions. Both were initially taken aback at being declared ineligible for joining the participants; they had clearly envisioned themselves a part of the process. But they graciously accepted my explanation that their presence and training might be inhibiting to their congregants, and that a safe space in which to explore theological and personal musings without the risk of judgment by professional spiritual leaders was a crucial element in the workshop design.

The first three sessions took place in April, a good time for several reasons: the busyness of the Lent/Easter season was over, the Spring weather made travel easier and more comfortable, and the lengthening days provided daylight into the evening, keeping us all awake and alert despite the fact that, by request from several participants, the block of time allotted for the sessions had been shifted a half-hour later, revised from 7:30 to 9:30 PM. The advantage of extended daylight was even more noticeable at the last session, which was held three weeks after Session Three. This hiatus came about because one couple had to be out of town for a while. I checked with the rest of the group, as well as with the church, whether it would be possible to move the last session, and had everyone’s approval. The unplanned three-week break was not ideal; while it did give the participants that much more time to work on their hymn writing, most had finished by that time and there was a real danger of a collective loss of momentum and interest.
Fortunately this did not seem to be the result, and the entire group, except for one person with a work conflict, was present for the evaluation exercise in the last session.

I had called each participant by telephone for an introductory chat, asking about their work, their involvement in the life of their church, their interest in the workshop, and what particular hopes they had for it. In return, the participants had an opportunity to get an initial impression of me, and to sound me out on the contents and requirements of the workshop, in case these would make them change their mind about taking part. Indeed, one person did offer her regrets, saying it just sounded too involved for the time she had available. Since much of this information would appear again on the Intake Questionnaire, the main purpose of this phone call was to establish a friendly relationship between the participants and myself.

However, there was more I wanted to know about each individual and the group as a whole, and to this end I mailed everyone a set of documents: a letter of welcome with thanks for their participation and promise of a good time of learning and reflection, a letter requesting their informed consent following a detailed description of the parameters of the workshop and permission to opt out of any questions or activities, and an Intake Questionnaire. This latter yielded some interesting and provocative baseline data.

**Intake Questionnaire**

I had asked about three of their favourite hymns and, based on the different personalities in the group, had expected a greater variety of choices than I received. I had

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166 These have already been outlined in Chapter 3 and can be found in the Appendix.
imagined that the quieter, more introspective types would select correspondingly contemplative hymns, for example, but with a few exceptions the great majority of hymns were lively, upbeat and festive. Of the thirty-eight titles offered (some listed more than three), three were Easter hymns, five were Christmas carols, and ten were hymns that one could categorize as hymns of praise, such as “Joyful, Joyful We Adore You” and “How Great Thou Art.” Two respondents wrote “any spiritual” and “pretty much any of the hymns in ‘Songs for a Gospel People’”; another mentioned “Battle Hymn of the Republic - really!” Only three people chose as favourites hymns that I would call contemplative: “O Sacred Head,” “Balm in Gilead,” and “Said Judas to Mary.” Four participants named “This Ancient Love,” also titled “Long before the Night.”

What intrigued and puzzled me were the numerous overlaps of selections. It must surely stretch the limits of coincidence for four of eleven people to mention the same hymn, three to list “Lord of the Dance,” two to choose “Love Divine,” and another two to refer to the tune JERUSALEM. I checked with the minister and the four people who chose “This Ancient Love,” but no one could suggest more than a guess as to the odd popularity of this one hymn. “It’s just beautiful” answered one participant, and the minister stated that it was a hymn that was sung fairly frequently at Eden Valley, though


168 Interestingly, one of these respondents called the hymn by its original text title, “And Did Those Feet in Ancient Times” which does not appear in Voices United or More Voices, and the other wrote “Love ‘Jerusalem’ tune but not the theology.” Neither made mention of the two more recent texts in Voices United matched to this tune. It would seem to support the hypothesis that for many if not most congregants the tune is the primary attraction for them in a hymn. One respondent suggested as much in her statement on this questionnaire that “I pay almost no attention to the words. I always assumed hymns were picked at random.”
to his recollection it had not been used with unusual frequency just before the workshop began. Asked to put together a list of his congregation’s “heartsongs” or core hymn repertoire of twenty items, Rev. Black kindly obliged. 169

An analysis of the list suggested several things to me. Although the church’s core hymnody runs a gamut between old (“Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah,” “Holy, Holy, Holy,” “Morning Has Broken”) and newer hymns (“Long before the Night,” “Come and Find the Quiet Centre”), its reference to the Deity is almost exclusively “God.” The great majority of the hymns are prayers addressed to God or, in a few cases, the Spirit, avoiding male pronouns. It was interesting that in the one case where pronouns for God are used (“Long before the Night”) they are feminine. Not one of the hymns mentions Jesus, although several make reference to Christ. Again with the exception of “Long before the Night,” which is a collection of stunningly original metaphors with God named as “she,” all the hymns use traditional images and poetic language. There are no female metaphors for God; there are, however, references to God as “strong deliverer,” “strength and shield,” “battle shield,” “sword,” and “high tower.” The Revelation images of God as resplendent enthroned monarch, presumably male, are only mildly balanced by the one non-traditional naming of God the Divine Eternal Lover (“Bless Now, O God, the Journey”).

169 The list was as follows, all from Voices United except “Spirit, Open My Heart” (More Voices): Joyful, Joyful (232), Come and Find the Quiet Centre (374), Morning Has Broken (409), For the Beauty of the Earth (226), Spirit, Open My Heart (MV 79), For the Healing of the Nations (678), Bless Now, O God, the Journey (633), Give Thanks for Life (706), Be Thou My Vision (642), Go to the World (420), God, We Praise You for the Morning (415), This Ancient Love (282), We Shall Go out with Hope of Resurrection (586), Make Me a Channel of Your Peace (684), Holy, Holy, Holy (315), God, Who Gives to Life its Goodness (260), God of Grace and God of Glory (686), Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah (651).
That two of the hymns were both on the core list and mentioned by several participants (“Joyful, Joyful” and “This Ancient Love”) leads me to believe that frequency of use does influence to some degree the popularity of hymns, and may therefore be a factor in influencing the congregation’s theology as well. That the most cited hymn on the questionnaire happens also to be the one on the core list with the most prominent nod to progressive theological thinking would suggest that this congregation is open to a broad spectrum of ideas while still preferring the very traditional hymns that for many are probably in the “memory bank” category. The traditionally-leaning favourites named by the majority of the participants would seem to bear this out.

I also found it interesting that without exception all the hymns—those on the heartsongs list and those chosen by the participants as favourites—are ones with particularly sturdy, attractive, singable tunes. My suspicion that for most congregants it is the tune, especially if it is a lively one, and not the text of a hymn that endears it to them and sets it in their memory was amply confirmed by the responses to the question “Name one hymn you do not like. Why is that?” Only five participants named an actual title; one chose not to respond. Of the rest, four respondents made similar comments: “Can’t think of one. The hymns that I don’t care for I tend to tune out entirely, so I don’t even know the names.” “This is difficult. I don’t know any hymns that I dislike enough to remember them.” “I can’t remember the names. . . . I pay almost no attention to the words.” “Can’t be too specific without a hymn book.” However, each of these four respondents qualified their remarks with a general statement of dislike for the “older, dreary, musty hymns that are downbeat and old-line Presbyterian,” as one put it. Others complained about hymns
that are “too old-fashioned to connect to, and the music relatively uninspiring;” hymns that are “slow and gloomy” and tend toward “solemnity.”

This apparently common desire for energetic hymn tunes emerged again in the question “Have you ever wished there were a hymn for a specific situation or need, and couldn’t find one?” Only six people replied; two of these wanted “more celebratory hymns” and more “upbeat and happy” hymns full of “energy.” Two others wanted more hymns “that reflect the everyday issues in people’s lives,” “hymns that address the quotidian sufferings and struggles of life . . . getting through the day;” one sought hymns “questioning one’s faith,” and one felt there was a need for “more hymns for victims of violence in a more personal way than Voices United or More Voices seem to acknowledge.” It would become interesting for me later in the process to correlate these various preferences and yearnings with the themes and tunes of the hymns the individual participants wrote.

Some of the questions on this questionnaire were less open-ended, designed to give me a better understanding of the level at which the participants would begin writing. Seven had written poetry before, but only two had ever attempted a hymn. Among those who had written poetry, there were as many different answers regarding their greatest challenge as there were respondents; among these were rhyme, metrics, content, “sharing feelings,” “being authentic,” and “finding the time to reflect quietly and somehow distil the great depth of ideas . . . into a short piece on paper.” Four were familiar with the indexes in hymnals and used them regularly; four had used the index of first lines to locate a hymn, and three admitted to never having used the index before. This general
unfamiliarity would explain the strong interest of the group in the section of Session 1 that explored and compared the indexes in the two hymnals.

In the answers to “What is God like for you?” it was evident that most of the participants held a form of postmodern non-theist view. Only Joy, worshiping in a Baptist church, used vocabulary that suggested a corporal deity: “A comforting figure, all-powerful.” Joan, with a strong Roman Catholic background, hinted at a similar anthropomorphic expression of God: “I knew as a little girl that I would never be alone in this life—that I would be supported, cared for and loved always. I just had to open my heart and recognize he [sic] was there.” However, she continued in more general terms: “God is love, hope, grace . . .” The other participants described their understanding of God in more abstract terms. William: “Something that is eternal and deep inside each of us.” John: “A guide to ethical behaviour.” Susan: “Mysterious and a source of comfort.” Kenneth: “At this moment, God is the belief in a higher purpose. Tomorrow it may be something else.” Isobel: “The spiritual power in each of us working together to achieve a collective goal. God is an internal abstract construct, not an external physical one.” For Julia “God is music to me.” Sloan thought of God as “a shaper of values, a driver of ritual, a signpost for what is right.” Two participants expressed themselves in panentheistic terms. Alex: “God is everywhere . . . present in everything . . . the essence of our world.” And Arija, while saying that she experienced God through nature and creation, added carefully, “That said, I also enjoy language describing God as both Mother and Father—nurturing and caring.”
I have listed these perspectives in some detail to add to the collective portrait of the participants. Educated and eloquent, this was clearly a group of people who for the most part had outgrown any kind of early childhood images of the Divine; broadening their concept of God would likely not be a significant workshop influence, as it might have been had they spoken of God mainly as father, friend, companion, king, Lord, or other such human, predominantly male, relational titles.

I next wanted to explore the source of their belief systems, specifically to what extent hymns had played a role in the shaping of their theological thinking. Two respondents denied any influence from hymns, four admitted to a very positive influence, and five referred to at least a marginal connection. Sloan: “I’m not sure about ‘shaping,’ but certainly inspiring music moves me.” John: “Scriptures shaped my thinking; hymns shaped the images.” Susan: “Hymns and sacred music have been a vehicle for worship and perspective on beliefs.” In an interesting reversal, two spoke of hymns not as influence but as reflection: William: “My favourite hymns are those that reflect my beliefs in an interior eternal.” In a similar vein, Alex wrote “The hymns I like reflect my beliefs.” From her earlier remarks one has to assume that Alex simply ignores the text of hymns she does not like. However, most participants owned to at least a marginal formative role of hymns in their theological understandings, and all viewed hymns as a positive ingredient in communal worship.
In the conviction that learning happens best when the learner is self-motivated,\textsuperscript{170} my questionnaire concluded with a query about what it was that drew them to this workshop, and what some of their hopes for the experience were. There seemed to be an element of friendly persuasion—three said they had been asked directly by the minister, one was there at the invitation of a spouse, another by a friend, and one had been encouraged by her parents. Nonetheless, there was a general expression of interest and curiosity in an activity that was seen by five as offering a novel outlet for their creative impulses, that two hoped would be of informative value in their roles as leaders on the Worship and Music committee, and that two others expected might help them in their ongoing composing of church music. With one exception every respondent used either “learn” or “understand” as words in their stated hopes for the course. This collective desire for self-improvement as well as a practical project was expressed most clearly, perhaps, by Sloan who saw the workshop’s goals as “an investment in myself and a meaningful output for the church.” Sloan also came closest to my intended element of spiritual reflection and transformation by writing of her hope “to stretch my boundaries of faith.”

\textsuperscript{170}While common sense would seem to suggest this, it is also at the root of modern adult learning theory as espoused by Jane Vella and others, as noted in Chapter 2.
Workshop Session 1

The first workshop session began promptly on time. After donning name tags, we sang Brian Wren’s “Surprise Us by the Words We Sing” after I had briefly introduced it, inviting them to notice words that might apply to their hopes for the workshop, e.g. “challenge.” The task called for circling them, but that seemed somewhat juvenile now. As I would do many more times, I amended the activity on the spot; we shared our words aloud and moved on.

After mutual introductions the participants in turn named one hope they had for the program and shared one story of how a particular hymn had helped shape their faith or influenced their life. I explained that we would be working often in table groups of three or four and invited them to sit wherever they felt comfortable, though preferably not with a family member; I reasoned that their experiences would be richer if they shared their thoughts and insights with people they knew less well. Each group elected a scribe.

Although the agenda called for them, the next two learning tasks felt unnecessary to me: asking this bright group to review the agenda and ask questions for clarification (there were none), and then likewise to review the Learning Covenant in their Appendix which spelled out such expectations as punctuality, respect for each other, attentive listening and confidentiality. In the interest of time I made another instant decision to depart from the script. This was not a group of people who were likely to exhibit difficult behaviour, so we merely read the list over and when I asked if anyone cared to add

171 The reader will want to follow the workshop outline in Appendix F so that the individual tasks do not need to be described in detail in the narrative.
anything, Alex suggested “Have fun!” On this cheerful note we began Task 4, defining what a hymn was and was not, and listing all the purposes they could think of for singing hymns at all. This was done with much energy and enthusiasm; it was clear that few had ever thought along those lines before.  

Learning Task 4.3 threatened to derail the entire evening; it would in the end be the most criticized segment of the workshop for its difficulty and lack of sufficient time to complete it and learn from it. At the same time, it was also reviewed as one of the more frequently mentioned items in terms of interest and eye-opening revelation. The task was to look up a given list of hymns in *Voices United*, study their text and any information on author and composer at the bottom of the page, and use this information to match the hymns with the historical era, listed on an opposing page, in which they were written and first sung. The intention in this exercise was to provide an admittedly very cursory lesson on the development of Christian hymnody through the centuries, pointing to changes in such characteristics as language and doctrinal evolution. The energy in the room was palpable, but there was a distinct note of tension as well. One table, where the two musicians Kenneth and Arija had joined forces, was enjoying this exercise greatly and came close to finishing by the time I signalled a stop. The other tables, without the expertise of a musician to assist, showed signs of frustration; when we charted them.

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172 The definitions three of the tables crafted were: 1) “A purposeful theological song designed to unify people and elicit an emotional response.” 2) “An active reflection on, and celebration of, a connection to God that is shared with the community.” 3) “A theological statement that can be musical or not and of any faith; it needs to be singable by a group of average people.” The list of purposes for hymn singing took up an entire page on the flip chart; the celebratory and unifying qualities were common to all the table groups’ lists when we charted them.

173 See p.207 for a list of the hymns used.
came to hearing the responses their answers indicated considerable confusion. It was interesting, for example, that not everyone in the room had a clear basic understanding of the innovations that characterized Reformation theology and hymnody.

This task was poorly designed and needs major redesign. It should have occurred to me that non-musicians would not be familiar with terms like *motet* or *polyphony*, and would not be equipped to easily distinguish between a Reformation-era hymn and one by Watts or Wesley, for example. Given more time, they might eventually have worked it out, and several participants commented kindly that they had found it enlightening anyway, but the stress of limited time and the requirement to examine far too many individual items made this a poor learning exercise. In another version of this workshop I might dispense with the looking up and classifying, in favour of providing the participants with a shorter list of eras already matched with a typical hymn; the task will then be to examine and chart any developments they see, with a short list as guide. Examples might include “How is God named? How are people represented in language or imagery? What might be the purpose for singing this hymn? What theological statements are made; do we continue to subscribe to them?” As a key learning task, it deserves more time. The break that followed this task allowed for a diffusion of pent-up frustration and a restoring of energy.

By contrast with the preceding exercise, Task 5 on Themes in Hymns was extremely successful; it was the exercise singled out later as the most interesting and enlightening of the entire workshop. By comparing which topics from my prepared list were found in the thematic indexes of the two hymnals, it soon became apparent that
even between 1996 and 2007, when the two resources were published respectively, a considerable shift occurred in the themes represented in each. After just a few searches the participants were quite excited to be able to accurately predict which topics were likely to be found in which book. They identified a greater emphasis on doctrinal hymns in *Voices United* and the appearance in *More Voices* of hymns on social justice concerns that had rarely been addressed in earlier hymnals, concerns like aging, handicaps, human diversity, interfaith respect, to name just a few.\(^ {174}\) There was a feeling of satisfaction in the room when the one topic from the list that both hymnals had in common, Mystery, was identified, and some insightful discussion followed about the changing trends in hymnody as reflected in the two indexes we had explored.

We got temporarily side-tracked when Joan, at her table, voiced great surprise to learn that the United Church does not think of Satan as a real corporal entity.\(^ {175}\) What about angels then, she wondered? Don’t we believe in heaven or hell? One of her hopes for the workshop had been to learn more about the United Church. As tempting as it was to stop everything and have a debate on the subject, the format of the workshop could not accommodate a lengthy diversion; as well, I felt ill-equipped to offer an official doctrinal

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\(^ {174}\) In the workshop we discussed briefly the difference between a normative hymn book which acts as the primary resource for a congregation’s faith expression and formation, and a supplement, which serves to augment the hymnal with new songs that respond to emerging social, liturgical and theological concerns, as well as introducing newer styles of music and global material. See William Kervin, ed., *Ordered Liberty* (Toronto: The United Church Publishing House, 2010), 179-181; also William Kervin, *Gathered for Worship* (Toronto: The United Church Publishing House, 2011), 108-110.

\(^ {175}\) Joan, we remember, is from a devout Roman Catholic background; her father had even, before his marriage, considered a priestly vocation.
position on the matter. I suggested that her minister was the best resource for such a discussion, and brought the focus back to the task at hand.\textsuperscript{176}

Task 6 involved my introducing the concept that certain images have become sensitive ones and should be handled with care in hymn writing; a frequent offender is the consistent use of “dark” as equated with ignorance or evil. Some were clearly puzzled at this; it had not occurred to them before and they were still wrapping their heads around the idea when I invited us all to sing a hymn that seeks to balance the negative equation, “Joyful is the Dark.” The singing lacked much conviction. It may have been just weariness, or unfamiliarity with the music, since none had sung it before. Julia remarked that she disliked it “because of the flats [in the music score].” Apparently she found this key signature depressing. Although it was an appropriate hymn to close the topic under discussion, it might be better for group dynamics to end each session by singing something familiar, preferably in the uplifting mood that the participants are so partial to. Sending them home feeling good would surely increase the likelihood of their enthusiastic return the following week.\textsuperscript{177}

With the request that they all come prepared at the next session with the theme of their own hymn, that they respond by e-mail to two questions relating to the first session,

\textsuperscript{176} In reviewing the session afterwards, I found myself wondering whether the excitement over this particular exercise would have been less if the participants had \textit{More Voices} in their church’s pews and had already been exposed to the kinds of hymns that had been such a revelation to them. It is conceivable that such congregants would be comfortable with the more contemporary issues, language and musical styles and ready to throw the net even wider in a discussion of hymn topics that are still under-represented in today’s hymnals.

\textsuperscript{177} To address the topic of challenging subjects such as heaven, hell, or Satan, for which there was no time in our discussion, I might also have e-mailed the participants with some brief reading, such as Kervin’s comments on dark/light imagery and “expansive language” in \textit{Gathered for Worship}, 36-39.
and that they diligently chart their thoughts, ideas, questions and progress in journal form, I wished everyone a good night.

E-mail correspondence following Session 1

Responses to my “homework” questions were slow to be sent in: most arrived shortly before Session 2 and caused me to scramble with my return comments.¹⁷⁸ I managed, however, and learned a lot more about the individual participants through these conversations. Analyzing them, I found there were five themes that came up repeatedly:

1) It is difficult to think of a topic for my hymn. (Four made this comment.) Susan lamented, “So many themes! How will I ever write a hymn?” William and Alex both worried that their theme might not accord with United Church theology. Isobel was beginning to think about writing a hymn arising out of her counseling occupation.

2) How shall I go forward? (Four) Joy wondered whether most hymns started as poetry or a melody, and what the occasion was behind the writing of hymns.¹⁷⁹ William asked for the “building blocks” of a hymn’s construction, inquiring whether there were specific rules, guidelines, or restrictions. Susan sounded relieved: “So it’s the syllables that count, and the rhythm or accent. Also the mood of the tune, does it fit.” In her journal, Susan pondered, “I’d feel most comfortable if it were a celebratory hymn, so I

¹⁷⁸ The questions were: “What questions do you have arising from today’s workshop?” and “Identify at least one new fact, thought or insight you acquired in Session 1.”

¹⁷⁹ I loaned her a book of stories about some great hymns’ creation.
probably won’t pursue the doubts theme.” Julia wrote that she was “just really curious about the whole process still of writing a hymn.”

3) What is a hymn anyway? (Two) Although this was explored in some detail in the first session, two participants were still somewhat hesitant about what a “proper” hymn was, or they did some deeper thinking about it. William wondered, “When is a subject matter so ‘small’ or narrow that the piece no longer really works as a hymn?” He also reflected, “I now appreciate the community nature of hymns. . . . I thought the dichotomy outlined between ‘hymn’ and ‘religious song’ was really quite profound.” Susan wrote, “Useful to consider what hymns really are—made me pay more attention to the words and to ask why the person wrote it.” In her journal she added, “Looking at the hymns in the hymnary, they all seem to be such strong professions of faith—no doubts there! Could I write a hymn about doubt?”

4) An interest in the hymns-throughout-history and comparison-of-indexes exercises. (Six) The positive reference so many made to this segment made it all the more unfortunate that there had not been sufficient time allotted, or that the exercise was too long for them to finish. Alex commented, “I was very interested to learn about the evolving theology reflected in hymns over time. I would have liked to have a bit more time.” Susan agreed: “The history of hymns was very interesting. I did not know about the different styles and periods represented in the hymn book. . . . It was great to find out more about the indexes in Voices United. What a goldmine of information! I never fully

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180 In the end Susan opted for writing a baptismal hymn—a rather interesting return to a subject that must have felt safe, or “suitable”, to her.
understood them before.” William: “I found the analysis of the various periods of hymnody very helpful. . . . It helped me appreciate why I enjoy some hymns and not others.” Joy commented, “I was interested in how quickly a theological shift (reflected in the hymnal indexes) can occur in a denomination.” And Sloan elaborated, “I have always loved the impact that music has on me, but I’ve never stopped to think about why. Evaluating the lyrics and seeing their evolution over time has helped me to see how that impact can happen. . . . I also enjoyed comparing the themes in the two books.”

5) New learnings and insights. (Seven) This was to me a particularly significant category of comments. It pointed to some unique learnings beyond those already mentioned, the stated learning goals of the workshop. For example, Joan was intrigued that “Satan, angels and hell have a different place in the United Church than I previously realized.” Arija was incensed, “that a new hymnal for the United Church wouldn’t be a priority at all is news to me. . . . If the only musical representation we have as a denomination becomes more and more ‘dated’, that is what newcomers and visitors will see. I find that depressing.” Isobel remarked “[I] appreciated your comments about black/white and dark/light.” John had learned, among other things, “that ‘hymnody’ is a noun.” And he offered this encouraging remark: “I am realizing that we will be getting much more out of this experience than we anticipated.”

From just these brief comments, still early in the process of actually writing their hymn, it seems clear that this eloquent and curious group of individuals had already

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181 This is a reference to the class discussion of stereotypes that have become problematic because they are potentially hurtful to certain segments of the population.
begun to experience different types of transformation. Whether of a straight factual nature (“hymnody is a noun”), an expansion of prior knowledge (“I never fully understood the indexes before”), or a new understanding of the self (“understanding why some hymns have a greater impact on me than others”), a good deal of learning had already taken place, laying a solid foundation for the work ahead.

From e-mail comments I received that first week I was able to determine that six participants were still searching for a theme on which to write, two were considering a theme of recovery from mental illness, one would paraphrase a biblical parable, and one would write on joy. Although I had not expected it this soon, Joy sent me a draft of her first stanza, followed by the question “What else can I say about doubt?”

**Workshop Session 2**

In the second session a week later, a new person joined the group. Kenneth had apparently enjoyed Session 1 so much that his wife, Isobel, expressed an interest in participating herself. This fortuitously replaced a participant who had decided to drop out even before the course began, and we were back to eleven in number. I knew that Isobel would have no trouble catching up with the help of her musical husband if necessary. Warmly welcoming her, I handed out the work sheets for Session 2 and we began by

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182 See Appendix G for first drafts and final versions of the participants’ hymns.

183 My intention in distributing each session’s worksheets on the day of their use was to keep the group together and prevent working ahead, something I feared might cause confusion, especially for me. As well, I wanted to remain free to make adjustments to the session work beforehand, if necessary. I would not do it that way again. The participants would have been more comfortable had they been able to see the program in its entirety, possibly having access to information they needed in their writing that was still to
singing the familiar “What a Friend We Have in Jesus” (Tune: FRIENDSHIP). To introduce the concept of alternate tunes and how they could influence the tone of a hymn text, we then sang the same words to a different tune, BLAENWERN. There was general fascination at this procedure, and lively reaction. The group seemed more at ease this week, having seemingly bonded over a mutual purpose, and they were quite eager to explore the rest of the indexes, which we had not looked at in the previous session, and learn about tune names and meter.

Because much of this material was new to many of the participants I decided on the spot to dispense with the small-group directions and work more as one group; this gave me a chance to check for incomprehension and offer corrections. It also saved time, and allowed everyone to hear all the responses. I remained as much as possible in the role of resource person rather than lecturer-teacher. There was real energy, even laughter and competitive enthusiasm, in Task 2.4, the working out of meters. However, I learned another lesson the hard way: It would have been more efficient for me to have come prepared with the meters already notated in my book. As it was, I was scrambling to work the exercise along with the participants. While I kept ahead of them easily enough I was not able to use that time to circulate freely and observe the groups at work.

Task 3.2, finding alternate tunes, was difficult for many, so again we worked together rather than in small groups. The non-musicians had trouble identifying tunes and come. In the case of an unexpected absence they would have been able to read and work ahead on their own, keeping up with the group. As well, it would have avoided the irritating need for weekly inserting of pages in the correct order, making sure none were missing, as indeed was the case in this second session. As a result, something of professional polish and trust in my leadership was lost, as well as something of a compromise to the flow of the pedagogical process.
singing them once they had located the correct metrical category. Had there been more musicians in the room I might have assigned one to each small group. As it was, I sang the opening bars of any tunes they did not recognize but asked for, and in this way the various text/tune pairings they suggested were quickly and efficiently examined and evaluated, something everyone seemed to find intriguing.

Task 3.3 is a well-designed exercise which immediately got the point across about matching not only meter but accents and syllabic emphases. There was no apparent need for the rather simplistic “finish the sentence” tag-on; we omitted it.

Task 4, a skit on tune appropriateness, went well. Arija acted the part of the minister, I played the organist, and the change from paper-based exercises to watching a short drama was salutary as the group began to tire and lose focus. They still managed to give thoughtful answers to Task 4.2 (What factors make one tune more appropriate than another for a given text?), but the break that followed was appreciated by the leader as much as by the participants. We had covered a lot of ground in the first hour.

Task 5, in which I told the story of one of my own hymn writing endeavours, could have been a more positive learning experience if we had had the copies of the hymn “Jacob, Wrestling with the Angel”\textsuperscript{184} which was to have been inserted into their

\textsuperscript{184} Session 2 was, in my evaluation, the weakest of the four, largely due to my lack of attentive preparation, combined with a huge amount of new material in a short period of time. I had had some bad personal news that week; in addition I was stressed from trying to reply to the e-mailed comments that all seemed to arrive just hours before I left for the church. This proved to be a reminder to me that the workshop leader needs to be very well prepared in order to deal with last-minute events, and the session to follow, in a calm and non-anxious manner. One participant commented later that I had seemed nervous. “There was no need,” he added generously. “You were beautifully organized and the material flowed easily.” Despite his kind words, I knew I had not been at my best in Session 2 and resolved not to let this happen again.
Appendix section of the workbook. I had unfortunately forgotten to bring these, and not having the text in front of us to follow along meant that I had to read it out. This was a considerably less effective learning method, especially for visual learners. Having the entire workshop and Appendix items prepared and distributed at the first session would have avoided this embarrassing episode.

Task 6, sharing and critiquing the themes of our hymns along with the proposed tune, was a good way to end the session on a quiet but forward-looking note. Conversations were intensive and very supportive. As time had run out and there was a general feeling of weariness in the room we did not sing a volunteered hymn, as per Task 7. I reviewed the homework assignments, reminded them to write up their writing journey in their journal, and dismissed the group with thanks for their hard work and words of encouragement in their hymn writing. At Session 3 I hoped to have at least everyone’s first stanza to work with.

E-mail correspondence following Session 2.

From the responses to my three questions after Session 2 it was easy to see that the single most interesting thing the participants felt they had learned related to the way texts and tunes could be interchanged, with the use of the metrical and the tune indexes.\(^{185}\) Indeed, all eight of the respondents listed this as their major new learning.\(^ {186}\)

\(^{185}\) The three questions were: “What was the single most interesting thing you learned today?”, “In what way(s) will you look at the hymnal and the hymns therein differently now?” and “What questions remain for you as you begin to write your own hymn?”

\(^{186}\) Three did not respond, for various reasons.
Isobel was the most articulate: “I had no idea that the words and numbers at the bottom of each hymn actually referred to the name of the tune and its meter. I knew that we sang different words to different tunes but had no idea how this magically happened. Now I do!”

The transferability of tunes so impressed several respondents that they made it their answer to the second question as well. No longer would they assume that every text was wedded to one and only one tune. In addition, Sloan said she would have “a greater appreciation for the technical elements in hymns,” a statement echoed by Susan. Isobel replied that she would be more aware of how hymnal indexes categorized the book’s contents: “I’ve never looked at indexes before.” Joy would be more conscious of “how integral tune choice was to the mood of the hymn.” John pondered that “Understanding the hymnal helps me see how any hymn fits into the larger theological picture in terms of the church year and date of writing.” Alex candidly admitted, “I’m not sure I will look at the hymnal differently, although I might when looking at a hymn I don’t know.”

In reply to question three, after voicing a few more hesitant musings, most participants sent in the first draft of their hymn a few days later; in fact, the majority had gone well beyond the first-stanza request and offered a complete hymn text. William asked some important questions about whether rhyme was necessary, and what the most effective voice was in which to write: “I notice that many hymns are in the third person, but to me that seems distant. I have a natural tendency to write in the first person singular, but perhaps that makes it too personal.” Joy answered her worry about what

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187 In Appendix G the reader can compare every participant’s first with their final effort.
more she could say on doubt with two more, very moving, stanzas, to which she had now added a rhyme scheme. John was relieved to discover that he was meant to write only text; he had worried that he was to compose a new tune as well. Deciding on a known tune and writing to its meter was his particular hurdle that, once cleared, sent him happily forging ahead. Susan and Sloan were more introspective, concerned with making their hymns “more poetic, inspiring,” and “to go deeper, push for better expression.” In her journaling, Joan described how she gradually progressed from a few unfocused phrases to hearing the tune for “Morning Has Broken” in her head and recognizing it as the right one to support what she wanted to write.\(^{188}\) Kenneth’s startling contemplation of using Rachmaninoff’s “Vocalise” as his tune was soon tempered by the realization that this would take more time than the workshop allowed. Instead, he sent in a hymn text based on the story of the prodigal son “from the father’s point of view. The story is often interpreted as a metaphor, with the father playing the part of God. That’s fine, but it robs the father of his own story.”

Perhaps the most complicated beginning was Alex’s. She, too, had a theme and soon a text in mind, but once it was written she found it next to impossible to work with it to fit a familiar meter and tune. She was finally persuaded that her chosen tune, HERE I AM, LORD, would simply not work. Unfortunately, neither did any other tune contained in the hymn book. Undaunted, she wrote, “I will keep struggling. It is taking a lot more

\(^{188}\) “Morning Has Broken” is typically associated with the traditional Gaelic tune BUNESSAN.
time though than I anticipated.” In the end her solution was to have her husband write her a new tune to fit her text.\(^{189}\)

By the time the third session rolled around, only two participants had still not sent in a first draft: Joan, who was still working out her ideas, and Julia, who sent in regrets due to illness.

**Workshop Session 3**

In the third session I made an impromptu decision which, in hindsight, was unwise because it cost us too much valuable time. Excited by the nearly complete hymn texts I had received, I wanted to let the participants see each other’s progress. Instead of sticking to the scripted time allotment by singing only one stanza of each hymn, we sang every hymn in its completeness to date. At the time I also thought it desirable to let every writer say a few words about their text and the choice of tune, even inviting comments from the other participants. While there was some value to this as a motivational and educational tool, it took seventy minutes instead of the intended thirty and meant that we had to rush through the remainder of the evening’s session.

Fortunately, Task 2 on rhyming was quickly covered by condensing the hymns examined in 2.2 and 2.4 to one or two, moving along when I judged that the points had been made. As a group, there was far more interest in the various “writing traps” in Task

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\(^{189}\)“He just made it up and then he left for England. It is something like this: GCEDGECDDDD / EFDCBAGFE / EFGAGFDD / CBFDBDBCCC.” The musically astute reader will no doubt appreciate my being torn between the wish to encourage such creativity and the urge to insist that Alex start over, with a known tune. As it turned out, with considerable working out together of this enigmatic schema, Alex’s vision prevailed, as did her husband’s tune.
3. We saved more time by not following the directions to post their suggestions on sticky notes but rather calling them out for me to list on the flip chart.\textsuperscript{190}

After the break, there was genuine interest in the issue of inclusive language for people. Emotions ran especially high when we were discussing the editing of non-inclusive texts, particularly texts of beloved old hymns. There was a feeling of unease among many participants that editing was unfair to the original poets, and a lively discussion ensued around the necessity for such “tampering.” Others defended the practice stoutly, leading to a fruitful interchange on how language updating might be done with maximum sensitivity, and if this were not possible or desirable, how other means might at least offer balance for the offending text. The role play, in which various objections to editing were examined, elicited both thoughtful insights and some healthy hilarity to counter the passion-charged atmosphere in the room.

Since we had already touched on the question of other human justice concerns besides male-dominant language in Session 1, I chose to omit task 4.2 as redundant. With time running out, I was forced to make some rapid decisions regarding the relative merit of the remaining material, so that some thinking at least could be stimulated around the issue of God-language. For Task 5.1 we divided into three groups, each responsible for making a list of as many different names or images as they could think of or find in the hymn books for \textit{one} person of the Trinity. Some very active and vocal work ensued.

\textsuperscript{190} Notwithstanding the importance Jane Vella assigns to physical movement in learning, the late evening hour and the median age of the participants rendered them quite happy, when surveyed, to remain seated for the majority of the learning tasks. The break seemed to provide sufficient stretching opportunity. A less cerebral and more energetic group, perhaps one made up of much younger participants, might have made this adaptation less successful.
After a few minutes each group read out their list as I wrote it on the flip chart. Discovering that Jesus had by far the greatest number of “aliases” intrigued them. It would have been an excellent start to a theological discussion, had there been more time: how names and images shape and inform our concepts of God’s character, and how those names and images have shifted over time, with what results for theologians and hymn writers. The half hour we lost at the beginning of the session cost us this debate.

Because time was nearly out I encouraged the participants to work on Task 5.3, Nancy Telfer’s “99 Names for God,” on their own at home. They would miss out on group discussion but the solitary exercise still had the potential for stimulating new ways of thinking about creative and unusual names for the Divine, names that they might never have otherwise considered. As an introduction to this exercise I read to them excerpts from the texts of three hymns: Carl P. Daw Jr.’s “Sing to the Lord No Threadbare Song,”191 William L. Wallace’s “Come, Let Us Dwell in that Place of Great Wonder,”192 and Thomas H. Troeger’s “Source and Sovereign, Rock and Cloud.”193 None of the three can be found in either **Voices United** or **More Voices**; they address the problem of trying to contain God in human words and images through particularly thought-provoking texts.

The session closed with our reading aloud, together, the text of “When We Seek Language” by Carl P. Daw.194 In a quick bit of review, I elicited from the participants the

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reason for our reading rather than singing the hymn: an unfamiliar tune to a meter for which there was no ready familiar alternate. There was no homework assignment beyond the polishing of their hymns, with or without my assistance by e-mail. The unplanned three-week hiatus before we met again would give them all plenty of time to fine-tune their work.

It needs to be said at this point that the observations I collected from each session were not as comprehensive as I would have liked. I was simply too busy leading the exercises to make more than sketchy notes, which I then fleshed out from memory as soon as I was able to at home. With hindsight, it might have been useful to ask an impartial observer to record group dynamics, specific verbal comments or responses for an extra layer of data. Sensing offers several views on this. On the one hand, he claims that “the idea of a non-participant observer is not possible. The presence of a note taker, even in the corner of the room, affects how the system reacts and how people behave. . . . While researchers strive for accuracy in their observations and validity in their analysis, they also must reflect on how their role as researchers influences the setting.”\textsuperscript{195} On the other hand, in discussing focus groups as tools for evaluation of a process, Sensing does suggest that “focus groups work best when two people partner together. The person leading the group is often called the moderator or facilitator. The second person is the

\textsuperscript{195} Sensing, \textit{Qualitative Research}, 95.
As we will see, in my case a recording device assumed the role of note taker. As we will see, in my case a recording device assumed the role of note taker.

**Workshop Session 4**

With most writers having finished their hymn by Session 3, little more work was done during the break. To my regret, Julia never did write anything, or attend the workshop after the second session. Alex sent in several more drafts of her hymn and we worked together to fit it into her husband’s melody, which I finally received in musical notation and so was able to play as she heard it. Arija never found the time to write the promised second and third stanzas; given her young family and a recent move, this was not surprising. It was appreciated that she stayed with the program to the end. Joan’s final draft was so late that she brought copies with her, to be tucked into the compiled opus.

This last, celebratory session was held in more relaxed surroundings, a comfortably furnished alcove room on the main floor, with a grand piano around which the seats clustered. We were joined by the minister and the music director, and I handed

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196 Ibid., 123. In my research I have not come across any other specific suggestions that an independent observer be present to take notes in addition to the researcher. I agree with Sensing that this might feel intimidating to the participants and negatively affect Vella’s crucial learning principle of a “safe” learning environment.

197 The day of Session 4 she e-mailed to apologize, mentioning anxiety, frustration and embarrassment: “I don’t think I can do this hymn. . . . The thought of sharing it is difficult for me, even more so with my parents in the group. . . . It’s been so much harder than I expected.” I tried to elicit from her what exactly had made this so daunting, since her response would have been useful in assessing the workshop, but I never heard from her again.
out copies of everyone’s hymns, bound into report covers. Everyone was present except Julia and Isobel, who had a work conflict.

It was an enjoyable time of singing, friendly commenting, and congratulations on the hard work that had produced ten very different congregational songs. The two staff members’ remarks were warmly supportive. On two occasions the music director asked to have the piano seat, to offer his own musical interpretation of a hymn. The professionals’ interest in their work was deeply gratifying for the writers, who became more and more animated as the evening progressed. Once again the singing and discussion around each hymn took far more time than I had planned. With only a half hour remaining, Rev. Black suggested that his preference for introducing the hymns to the congregation was to feature them one by one as they fit into various worship services, rather than having a fifth session in the form of a hymn sing or an afternoon tea, two ideas I had floated as possibilities. There was mutual consensus, and the two staff members excused themselves.

When we all assembled again I placed a small voice recorder on the coffee table in the center of the room for our final group task, a focus group feedback discussion based on questions I had prepared in advance.198 Despite the late hour, responses from the participants were insightful and candid. I handed out copies of the written feedback questionnaire in a stamped, self-addressed envelope, thanked them for their participation, promised to run my writing past them as it pertained to them to ensure accuracy, and with

198 See Appendix H.
many mutual good wishes the last session came to an end. At home, I transcribed the audio-recording and teased out major themes.

**Focus Group Evaluation Session**

Question: Was this workshop fun? Were there any parts you particularly enjoyed, or could have done without?

That the workshop had not been “fun” for every participant was evident from Julia’s dropping out, citing anxiety and the potential for personal embarrassment. Others, however, spoke of a happy experience. Sloan, Kenneth, Joy and Alex agreed that the actual learning and discovery of things they had not known before “were the fun part. For example, learning about the different indexes and learning about the differences between *Voices United* and *More Voices*—that was fun for me,” (Kenneth.) Arija added “One of the things I loved learning about was when you brought up about inclusive language in a way I’d never even thought about, particularly the “light and dark” stuff. . . . So much of the stuff I have written has used those references.”

The amount of homework was a problem for some. Susan and Sloan used the word “daunting” with reference to the extra-class assignments. “Especially if you are not musically inclined,” Sloan explained, “or you just have all these other things happening; it just makes it a bit more difficult.” Arija said, “I don’t think I understood how much work there was going to be outside of the workshop and I would have been better prepared if I knew that before I said Yes. . . . I was under the impression that I was coming for two-hour sessions and that was going to be kind of what it was.” Susan
worried more about her readiness for what she saw as a deeply responsible task; she wrote, “For me it was a daunting thought to be putting together a hymn, because that has so much weight in my mind, that it had to be very deep and theologically sound, all those things I wasn’t sure I could do.” Graciously she added, “You made it happen . . . as I got into the process of learning about the various ways in which hymns were put together and how the hymn book is structured, and so on . . . that made it very interesting and relevant. There were some key moments when things began to come together . . . that made it fun, that part, when I got to that point. And your incredible positive feedback all the time was really helpful.”

As was already mentioned earlier, there was agreement that one of the most interesting learning tasks had been the matching exercise between historical periods and representative hymns. This fascination was not well served by the poor construction of the task, which assumed too much knowledge and suffered from a lack of time to complete it. “I would have liked more time to explore,” said Alex. “Remember that really quick overview of the changing theology of hymns? I would have liked to spend some more time on that.” Joan echoed the thought: “[I would have liked] more types of information on history or the types of changes . . . I found that was fascinating and I would have loved to learn more.” Kenneth voiced a solution: “You’d probably need to add another session.”

Question: If you were asked to re-design this workshop, what changes would you like to make?
To my great surprise, responses to this question revolved around a general agreement that a fifth session would have been advisable, to allow for more time to explore the topics that they had all found so interesting. “You tried to pack too much into the time allotted,” said Kenneth. When I explained that five sessions had been my original plan, but that I had been concerned that too long a time frame might be a deterrent, Joan said, “I think having one additional session would have been ideal, and I definitely would have come . . . I think one extra session might be a good amount but not too much.” The extra time would also have allowed for more in-class work to be done, leaving less to do at home, Joan mused. But she quickly recognized practical difficulties in her suggestion: “How are you going to talk about the learned things and also write your hymn and also discuss . . . it’s really difficult, a challenge.” There was some discussion around Kenneth’s suggestion of structuring the workshop as a one-day event, but that was soon dismissed as impractical. “To do it all in one day I don’t think would work for me,” Susan offered. “There’s too much of a process going on; it’s just a bit heavy.”

A second theme that emerged was the need for some participants to have a better defined beginning to the actual process of writing a hymn. Alex especially had struggled with this. “You had us start to write our hymn before we talked about music. I would have found it a lot easier if I had been told right at the beginning that I should be prepared to find a tune and then to worry about my words. I either had to abandon my words, which I didn’t want to do because I’d already invested in them, or I couldn’t go forward. If John [her husband] hadn’t come along [to write her a tune] I don’t know what I would
have done.” William voiced similar concerns around the clarity of expectations: “If you could have, at the beginning, laid out the specific objectives and expectations of us . . . from an anxiety point of view it would have been easier, kind of, if I knew what the pieces were and when they were coming.” John disagreed, pointing out that the work binder had spelled out the specific goals for each session, and that we had even reviewed the agenda for the first session together. But I had to admit that I had abandoned this piece of each session after that, thinking the participants were quite capable of looking over the upcoming learning goals for themselves. Apparently for some it would have been helpful to be this specific, and for John an initial laying out of the “building blocks” of hymn writing that would be covered, and in what sequence, would have eliminated stress and helped them get started more efficiently. Arija, an educator, spoke in terms of pedagogical tools such as a self-assessment chart. “Like, ‘at the end of the course you should be able to determine what meter is, write in that meter’. . .” To which Susan replied, “You’re making this hard!” Laughter followed, but I got the message: the workshop design needs revision so that participants are absolutely clear from the outset what the steps will be in their hymn writing, and the choosing of their tune needs to come earlier in the process.

Several participants also addressed personality issues that related to their comfort levels. Arija was direct: “Some of the language used in the presenting . . . more the off-hand comments, kind of like ‘You know this,’ or ‘This song is easy’, and then we’d start singing it and I was kinda like, this is it, even for me, I don’t know this tune and this is not intuitive, and I know from my art and education work that those kinds of comments
can affect how the workshop goes in some ways . . . because this is really not that easy for me.” Again, I was reminded by her comments that the leader should be wary of all assumptions regarding the skills and knowledge of participants. For those who already have mastery of those skills it can feel gratifying; for the rest it can be alienating, even shaming. I was grateful for this important insight, the more so when Arija added, “But I loved the positive feedback. I feel like you gave of yourself so much more than what I was expecting a workshop leader to give, and so that was one thing I really appreciated.” Several other, similarly affirmative, compliments moved us to the next question.

Question: What was the hardest part of writing your hymn? The easiest?

For Alex and Susan, finding a tune to support their text was their greatest challenge. Again, more attention to this aspect, earlier on, would probably have been helpful, especially for participants without much musical background. While she did not speak up at this point, Alex obviously struggled with finding her tune. It is difficult to separate the text of a hymn from the associated music, so in future revisions of this workshop I will incorporate work on tunes sooner.

For John, William and Joy the greatest difficulty lay in deciding on a theme, what to write about in the first place. “It was a right move,” said William, “you having us finding that first. Once you get through that, then it becomes a lot more mechanical.” John put it slightly differently: “I had rhymes and tunes going through my head and then I tried to think, what can I say about that? It’s already been written. I’d several times wake up in the middle of the night and think, yeah, that’s a nice tune, but what do I write
about? That was the difficult part, formulating the topic which you could develop.” Joy had no trouble coming up with a first stanza, but “for me, it was moving from one verse which I had pretty set to three verses — how do I expand it?”

It was interesting to me that no one mentioned meter, which is often a problem for beginning poets and had required some work with a few of these participants too in the early stages. Perhaps that is because this group, while not all musicians, does sing regularly in church and so has developed an ear for cadence that made necessary adjustments in their writing easy for them.

Asked about the easiest aspect of the work, their responses were a general nodding and murmured assents to William’s “Having your feedback was the easiest thing. You were very clear, very thoughtful. Reading over the amount of time and care you put into feedback made it feel important, what I was doing. [It felt like] something worthwhile, and that gave me a lot of momentum and inspiration to, you know, get the next draft out.” The editing work by e-mail with each participant is clearly an indispensable part of the workshop, since there is not likely to be time for such individual attention during the sessions themselves. Ideally, participants will have opportunity to discuss and compare the content of their hymns in the sessions, but they need the time at home to do their thinking, searching and crafting of the text. It is the workshop leader’s task to offer guidance, technical advice and encouragement as it is required by each individual.

I chose to disregard the penultimate question, “What did you learn about hymns that you didn’t know before?” Time was rapidly running out and there would be
opportunity to reflect on this question in the final written questionnaire. With the intention of wrapping up the evening, and indeed the entire workshop experience, I asked an open-ended question.

Question: When you write your second hymn, what might you do differently from the first?

Laughter greeted Joan’s quick “Ask for help sooner!” Joy offered, “Choose a different theme.” Arija, who had written her own music, pondered in practical terms. “I would do it to an existing tune. Because if the goal is to have your piece sung . . . picking a tune that people already know . . . if you’re trying to appeal to a music director or whatever, they’re much more likely to present it to their congregation.”

William said, “I would start by just listening to tunes and finding out what really touched me, then picking it and writing around it.” To which Alex responded “I would do exactly the same thing. I wouldn’t put a word to paper without having picked a tune.” Susan disagreed, “. . . mainly because I had a tune in my mind that I really wanted to write to, it’s my favourite tune, [but] I couldn’t get what I was thinking was the important theme for me to really work out with the rhythm and stuff. So I don’t necessarily think that my starting point would be the tune any more. For me it was a journey, finding that theme. I started out with one idea and ended up with something very different.”

I explained that whereas most professional hymn writers have a topic in mind before they begin writing, something they want to share with others, our workshop situation was in a sense artificial, asking novices to pull a theme out of the air. Kenneth
replied, “But I liked that artificiality! How many people in this building would ever think that they could write their own hymn? I really love this idea of sharing these hymns with the ministers so that the idea carries on; it’s not just one flash and then everybody forgets about it. There’s high hopes, some inspiration to other members of the congregation to be able to put what they hold dear into words and use it in the service.”

On this forward-looking note we ended the focus group session and said final farewells. In the weeks that followed, the written questionnaires were returned to me slowly, some by e-mail, others hand-written in the envelopes provided. I sensed a certain weariness with the request for yet another reflection exercise. The participants were aware, of course, that the documentation was in the service of my study, but once the hymns were written the process must have felt finished for them and they could be excused for wanting to move on with other interests. The following is a distillation of their written responses.

Feedback Questionnaire:199

Workshop design.

There were as many different reasons given for joining this workshop as there were participants, and as many different hopes for the experience. Two participants admitted to having come without set expectations, in response to a personal invitation. Two were interested in historical information of hymns, three were hoping to find a new

199 See Appendix I.
creative outlet. Three others wanted to learn more about the music of hymns (“I know so little about music,” said one), and two were looking for a meaningful spiritual experience. To have fun, to meet new people, and to learn how *Voices United* came into being were also mentioned. Given such a variety of expectations, it was gratifying that all the participants answered “Yes” to the question whether their hopes had been met. Three mentioned small disappointments: lack of sufficient time to complete certain exercises, concern that the end product lacked profundity, and regret that the creation of *Voices United* had not been addressed. The general tone, however, was one of gratitude for the workshop and all that had been learned. The most frequently cited appreciations were for learning about the construction of hymns, for better understanding of the hymnals’ indexes, and for the introduction to the historical contexts of hymns.

Recalling the focus group discussion, it came as no surprise that the question of what they would change in the workshop design elicited repeated suggestions for more time, to accommodate “so much interesting material.” Whether this were to happen with the addition of a fifth session, “shorter but more frequent classes,” or, as one person suggested, by combining sessions three and four to free up an entire evening to the history exercise which they had all found so captivating—the strong consensus was that more time would be beneficial to the goals of the program.

Beyond this common theme, suggestions were of a more individualistic nature, focusing on personal needs. Thus, one person would have liked to begin the first session with a discussion of why hymns matter at all, and why they are still being written. Another asked for the material in the Appendix to be included in the body of the
workbook, to eliminate “flipping and hunting.” One complained about too much homework while yet another suggested that several of the exercises could have been done at home, to free up class time for other material that required the instructor’s leadership. One participant wanted more small-group time, another would have preferred to keep the group together throughout. When I come to revising the workshop design I will give careful consideration to each suggestion offered, since my perspective as leader was of necessity different from that of the participants.

Positive comments were extensive and enthusiastic, focused on three themes: Lots of singing (“The opening and closing hymns set the tone”), the benefits of working in small groups, and an appreciation for “the depth of feedback between sessions . . . practical tips . . . a patient and knowledgeable instructor.”) Three people were not convinced the small groups had been effective. But that it had generally been a positive experience was evident from eight supportive comments, including “I’m not usually a fan [of small groups] but I enjoyed it this time; probably because I liked these people!” Another said, “I valued the community aspect and the comfort of sharing thoughts and feelings with the same group of people.” Like the educator she is, Alex replied, “Adults learn better from each other than from a teacher; [they] take advantage of skills and knowledge everyone brings.” She commented, however, that our groups had been too small, that four to six made a more functional unit for discussion and work. To this I would respond that the advantages of a larger unit would be offset by less time for each individual to speak and engage with the others.
Asked for any additional comments, each participant returned to his or her main complaint one more time. The strong internal consistency of their responses on questionnaires, in the focus group, and in private e-mail correspondence, gives me reason to trust their validity.

**Hymn writing**

The section on Hymn Writing in this questionnaire was designed to uncover skills learning that had occurred, i.e. what cognitive transformation had taken place. Asked whether their definition of a hymn had changed, three people replied “No,” but the remaining seven spoke enthusiastically of having a better understanding now of what a hymn was. Two remarked that they had never considered a definition before; others commented on a new appreciation for the role of hymns in worship, and on seeing hymns no longer in isolation but interconnected by themes, historical characteristics and structural distinctions. A particularly poignant observation came from Joan, who is still new to the United Church: “Absolutely! I have not enjoyed many United Church hymns at Eden Valley; I felt detached from them. Now for me hymns can be personal again by taking time to connect more with the words, themes or music. I have a less passive approach than before.”

What specifically had they learned that was new? Again the responses fell into several definite categories: The evolution of hymns in historical context (seven mentioned this), the interchangeability of tunes and texts with the help of the indexes (four), and some of the technical elements of hymns, such as rhyme or meter (five). There
were idiosyncratic observations as well. “Everything was new to me!” wrote William. Joan repeated her amazement at learning of “the shift away from traditional views of heaven, hell, evil etc.” Alex probably spoke for many others when she said she had learned “how difficult it is to write a good hymn.”

This difficulty took different forms for the participants, but the most frequently mentioned was the challenge of finding the right words to express their ideas; that included finding suitable sets of rhyming words. Two others struggled most with determining a topic on which to write, one had trouble with meter, and one found it hard to determine a tune. Two persons also mused on the problem of finding the necessary time and quiet for a task requiring contemplation.

What advice would they give to a friend who wanted to write a hymn text? Five participants said they would suggest starting with choosing the topic, one that was “meaningful to you . . . that you were passionate, excited about . . . that has broad appeal.” Three thought the first step should be settling on a suitable tune, as scaffolding for the text. The rest offered these suggestions: Be open to inspiration. Start with something easy. Know what you are wanting to do and why. Sloan opted out: “That [advising a friend] is not a scenario I can imagine!”

**Spirituality**

In this section of the questionnaire I tried to get away from the more technical aspects of the workshop to address my second research question, whether this exercise had stimulated not only cognitive but some form of spiritual transformation.
It was interesting to hear that the tune of hymns speaks more than the text to four respondents. Four others argued that the two elements were inseparable in judging a hymn. Only two replied that they paid more attention to the words than to the music. This would seem to underscore what is often observed by church musicians and clergy, that a good tune can redeem even a poor hymn text and contributes strongly to a hymn’s acceptance; an excellent text set to an unappealing tune will be considerably less successful. This discovery was relevant to my study because it supported my growing suspicion that the writing of a hymn text would not have any appreciable influence on the participants’ theological stance, as I had hypothesized. As it turned out, any spiritual transformation would come primarily from other aspects of the workshop, such as interaction and learning from each other’s points of view.

I asked how the participants envisioned God for two reasons: to see whether their responses remained consistent with the same question on the Intake Questionnaire, and to look for any signs of changed thinking. There was no movement whatever in anyone’s concept of the Divine. Those who had spoken of God in terms of a “figure” or “being,” or in one case a loving companion (“He”), continued to use that language. The rest of the participants, having already begun the workshop in a postmodern mindset wherein God was thought of as mystery, metaphor, “something [sic] greater and more permanent than the individual,” repeated their own unique attempts to describe the indescribable. Two used again the term “pantheism” although I surmised from their use of the word that they
meant to say “panentheism”—God in everything rather than God being everything. Two others described God as “a deep, authentic, warm peace” and “the coming together of people.”

Where had these philosophically quite sophisticated concepts come from, given that the hymnal Voices United which these persons sang from regularly includes so many hymns using more traditional language and imagery for the Holy? From the responses it appears that most of the participants had worked their ideas out for themselves over time. Two referred to the United Church’s New Creed and the more recent A Song of Faith as documents formative of their thinking, but there was considerable vagueneness in the rest as to how their faith tradition envisioned God, and where that vision had come from. What most of the participants did mention with appreciation is the United Church’s “acceptance of many different approaches,” a constant evolution of ideas, and a congregation’s freedom to decide its own particular set of beliefs and interpretations. None of the respondents seemed sure of where their own or their church’s more traditional images and ideas originated. Not everyone chose to answer; those who did ventured the Bible, family and cultural traditions, clerical interpretation, a “manufacturing by the church,” and “man’s [sic] efforts to understand and explain the world and reasons for being.” Only one referred to hymns as a source. This would seem

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200 Gonzalez, Essential Theological Terms, 126.


to conflict with responses on the Intake Questionnaire, where nine of the participants agreed that hymns had had a strong, or at least a marginal, role in the shaping of their theological thinking. More specific questioning might resolve the apparent slippage. My thinking is that the mention or non-mention of hymns was a consequence of the way the questions were phrased: In the first instance, hymns were specifically named in a closed question: “Were hymns a part of shaping your beliefs?” In the Feedback Questionnaire the question was far more open-ended (“Where do these traditional images and ideas come from?”) and the respondents’ thoughts would have roamed over a much wider territory from which to select their answer, which might have included hymns with further questioning.

The critical question of how their ideas of God had changed over time did not elicit any surprises, although this question was answered in some detail and with particular thoughtfulness. It was obvious that they were each in a very different place from that of their earlier years, which two of them described as belief in a “watchful bearded old man in the sky.” Joan and Joy, despite their two conservative faith backgrounds, were also still “figuring things out.” John admitted that he was not sure there even was a God “except in people’s imagination.” His wife, while still believing in a Higher Being, confessed to “having trouble with Resurrection or life after death.” To her, many Christian beliefs were “fantasy—wishful thinking.” Like several others, she described her evolving beliefs as “less simplistic, more complex, questioning, wondering.” If I had expected to work with a group of people still tied intellectually or
emotionally to a God in human likeness, I would not find them among this set of critical thinkers.

Since their collective theological thinking was already on the postmodern plane to which I had thought I might lead them through the process of hymn writing, it was not unexpected either that every single one of them replied in the negative to the question of whether the workshop had changed their thinking about God. “Nor did I expect this to be a faith exploratory,” explained Sloan. Nonetheless, whether out of loyalty or courtesy toward the workshop leader or just to be exact, six of the firm “No” answers were followed by a justifying “But” statement. John added that “hymn writing as a tool has helped me access my experience of God.” Joan wrote “No, but it [the workshop] has made me want to explore more the United Church’s interpretation of evil and sin.” Joy said it had helped her to spend some time around United Church folks “and hear a different theology.” Susan wrote that the workshop had made her “more aware of hymns as worship, petition, questioning.” John put it this way: “My vision of God has utterly changed, but not my feeling or knowledge of God.”

There was little apparent interest in answering the question “If hymn writing came easily to you, what new topics might you want to engage with?” The six who answered mostly remained interested in the topic they had written on already. Only Joy and Joan offered a new area to focus on. I interpret the weakness of this response to a general feeling that writing another hymn was probably not going to happen!

Most of the participants felt that their church’s core hymnody did not express either the community’s theology or their own. This was a surprise for me. It was not
unexpected in Joy, who had been raised in the United Church and was chafing at the restricted diet of praise choruses in her Baptist congregation: “I’d like to sing more about social justice, ecology, God as mother, etc.” Joan, new to the United Church, said she needed more time to learn about its theology. The rest of the group were uniform in their comments that, at best, only some of the hymns they sang spoke to and for them and for their congregation. They mused that “few hymns work for all,” and suggested a fracture line “between those wanting old or new.” Susan surmised that “most people prefer the old chestnuts over hymns relevant to current social issues.” Arija was particularly eloquent: “Nostalgia drives what older folks like to sing, and it’s usually [based on] the music, e.g. ‘Jerusalem,’ People like the feelings they get, not the lyrics. For older folks, songs that speak of Spirit seem ‘hippy dippy.’ It’s difficult to find hymns that speak to everybody when the denomination accepts such a spectrum of ideas surrounding God.” Sloan agreed: “I respond viscerally, but rarely does the text convey the meaning I think it’s designed to.” One respondent referred to many hymns as “formulaic”; another opined “Currently I find the hymns the least interesting part of the service. The words often feel contrived.” Alex persisted in her detachment from the words entirely: “I only engage with the music. I don’t need words to express my theology.”

This unexpected indictment of hymn texts astonished me. I would have anticipated that the participants would attempt, in their own hymn writing, to strive for the kind of language and content they missed. However, the next question indicated that
only four respondents felt they had broached new territory. Isobel and Joy both wrote about recovery from mental illness. “I had never seen that,” said Isobel, while Joy pointed to her use of the therapy phrase “great dialectic” as reference to God. Kenneth had explored a biblical story from a new perspective, and William felt that his theme, dealing with material temptation, was “new and modern.” However, even he, like all the rest, admitted that he had been taken aback by his reliance on traditional language and images. “I think I missed an opportunity” Aria said with regret, while John summed up what seemed to be a common feeling: “Just writing a hymn was new enough!”

Asked whether anything they had heard or learned had surprised them, the participants gave an array of different answers. Four commented on the variety of interesting topics their peers had chosen to write on, and their “impressive writing skills.” Kenneth added the wish that a hymn writing workshop would become a regular part of his church’s calendar. John and William mentioned their amazement at the way a different tune can change a hymn text’s focus. Joan again voiced her fascination with the United Church’s “shifting views on evil and sin.” Isobel was surprised to discover “how much meaning the old hymns have for some people.” Sloan kindly offered “Surprised, no. Glad to learn, yes.” Clearly, the workshop had left different impressions on individual participants, according to their interests or needs.

In the last, open-ended, question, I tried to get as close as possible to the issue of potential spiritual transformation in the participants, without leading their responses. I

203 “In your hymn writing, did you explore new themes and language, or rely on familiar ones?”

204 “Did you discover anything new about yourself?”
was looking for insights unrelated to factual learning, and for the most part was successful, although the answers tended to be brief. By this last item on the questionnaire the respondents may simply have become weary of soul-searching, or they may have needed more time for processing the workshop experience and how it had affected them. “No,” said one; “Always,” another. Susan discovered “that I can write a hymn!” John likewise had found “that everyone has some talent – I’ve never tried writing poetry.” Again, the negative responses were qualified. John: “No, but it continued to move me along in my journey.” Joan: “No, but it reminded me that I need to invest more time in practicing and reflecting on my faith.” Joy discovered that “my theology is closer to the United Church’s than I thought.” Isobel was more task-oriented: “[I was surprised] how easily it came together once I had the tune.” Alex found herself curiously attached to the words she wrote. “I wish that hadn’t been the case; I got much more easily discouraged than I would have expected, especially when I couldn’t find music.” Most pragmatic was Arija, whose busy life made her hand in some of her work late: “[I discovered] that I am terrible at time management!”

The Hymns

A final evaluation tool, and perhaps the most compelling document of all, is the hymn each participant wrote. Appendix H shows every writer’s first draft as well as their final version. Here I will examine each text individually before offering general observations.
William:

That he needed work on meter, rhyme, consistency of voice, and punctuation was clear to William from the start, but he had his theme and followed it through four stanzas, with a strong beginning and end bracketing his text. Once he had decided on his tune and taken into account my various points of critique, his final version was a singable exploration of the idea that material goods and human desires are a hindrance in the striving for holiness and grace. My e-mail correspondence with William was the most detailed and lengthy of all; we explored not only technical difficulties but verbal intricacies, like the different effect of the colloquial “grab” versus the more internal “yearn.” William’s journal jottings reflect his careful musings on his choice of the right tune, his desire to avoid “personifying God” in favour of a deep inner voice which he addresses in the hymn (although in his last line he does refer to “God’s gift of life”), and his awareness that what he wrote had to be able to resonate with a congregation of singers. A poet at heart, he includes wonderful images and word play like “lifeless life.” In his journal he mentions the theologically complex concept of “kenosis” by name, and his identification with the writings of St. John of the Cross, both of which are present in his hymn. Although he claimed that “everything” in the workshop was new to him, he also said that his ideas and knowledge of God had not changed, except in “vision.” He is open to writing another hymn. Whether he does or not, I believe the workshop will have made him cognizant of elements in hymns that he did not see before, such as the advantages of rhyme, the need for consistency in the person the hymn addresses, or the crucial role of an appropriate tune.
John:

Writing a hymn was a very new experience for John, and by his own admission he stayed within the safety of familiar language and theological contracts. His first attempt was a single-stanza doxology in which five of the six lines begin “O Lord” and there is a mixed use of “you” and “thee” in reference to the Holy. John would have benefited from an earlier direction to find a tune. Once he had CRUSADER’S HYMN in mind we were able to re-work his text into singable form. However, at this point John decided to start all over, with a totally new theme, a thanksgiving for the gifts of the four seasons. He had generous help from his wife and daughter, so that his new text was quite polished and needed little by way of amendments. He introduced the interesting suggestion that the stanzas might be arranged in different orders depending on the season in which the hymn is sung, and one of his three suggested tunes, SPIRIT DANCING, makes the hymn rather charming. It is a traditional prayer, addressing both “Lord” and “God,” despite the fact that John had confessed on a questionnaire to “not being sure there is a God.” Although there are no particularly fresh insights, the final hymn is evidence of much work involving the craft of hymn-text writing. Like William, John probably approaches hymnody now with more critical eyes, especially, as he says in the Feedback Questionnaire, with regard for “how music so much brings words to life.”

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Susan:

In her very thoughtful, comprehensive journal, Susan wrote, “It is nice to be paying more attention to the words of hymns. Till now, I think I have focused primarily on the tunes and whether I like them or not.” She first considered writing about doubt; her “questioning and wondering” are running themes throughout her journaling and questionnaire responses. Fascinated by the wealth of possible themes that she saw in the index exercise of Session 1, Susan finally decided on writing a baptismal hymn, focusing on the child’s belonging to the faith family, and highlighting the physical elements in the baptismal rite. Her first draft consisted of six stanzas, already technically flawless. Despite her private worrying that her content was “too simple; not sufficiently inspiring or poetic,” her text needed little work. All we discussed was a change of tune such that the six stanzas became three longer ones to the tune RUSTINGTON, a suggestion that she welcomed.

Susan’s main transformation seemed to me one of personal empowerment. Her frequently expressed longing for more “sophisticated” language nevertheless produced a well-crafted hymn in traditional style, over which she rejoiced: “I am glad I did the workshop . . . and I discovered that I can write a hymn!” This newfound confidence was affirmed when her hymn was sung in a baptismal service at Eden Valley a few months after the workshop ended, to much acclaim from the congregation and hints of its use at future baptisms. I would not be surprised if Susan attempted other hymns, with more of the depth in language and content she was so eager to achieve.
Kenneth:

Kenneth’s hymn text came off the loom complete; there was nothing I felt compelled to critique. Kenneth is an accomplished poet and musician; his delight in playing with words and images were obvious. He had given much thought to a suitable tune, settling at last on PICARDY: “I wanted a minor key, and I love the little arpeggio on ‘plea.’” He suggested a *tierce de Picardy*, or major final chord, to underscore the prayer’s being answered in the last stanza. Pleased with this hymn, he is thinking of writing others, further exploring scriptural stories and parables from a fresh perspective. Although Kenneth came to the workshop with the self-confidence of a proven writer, he nevertheless expressed in both his e-mail notes and in the Feedback Questionnaire a feeling of frustration that his work was not always taken seriously or performed. “It’s nice to be appreciated for one’s poetry. . . . I have been writing since high school, mostly stuffing it into a folder, never to see the light of day.” He also spoke of enjoying what he had learned about definition of a hymn, of appreciating “the different aims and styles of hymn writers through history,” and mused, “I’m glad you see the importance of recognizing the human when we contemplate the divine.” For Kenneth, transformation came mostly in the guise of factual learning, as well as in finding in me an appreciative audience of one, with whom he could share the joy of creating. It is interesting to me that Kenneth thought I had appeared nervous. Checking with others in the group, he was alone in this perception. I cannot help wondering whether there was some element of projection in his comment. At any rate, he had obviously enjoyed the workshop, since he
suggested on the final questionnaire that something like it should be made a regular feature of the church calendar.

Isobel:

Her work as counselor for people in emotional distress was the impetus for Isobel’s hymn. Originally she titled it “Refinding the Light.” The discussion around a stereotypical use of light images for health and dark ones for illness interested her, but she chose to keep that dichotomy in her text. The hymn is deliberate in avoiding any reference to God; Isobel is a firm believer in “the power of the human condition to overcome adversity” and her vision of God is that of “a collection of humanity’s strong positive desires and feelings.” On the Feedback Questionnaire she explains that “As a scientist and evolutionist I really looked hard to find a version of ‘God’ which made sense to me and my understanding of both the physical and spiritual worlds.” She admits that she finds the hymn texts sung in church largely “contrived” and not expressing her theology. The opportunity to put some of her thinking into the words of a hymn was a pleasant creative challenge, and she was surprised how quickly her ideas came together. We did some editorial work on such things as repetition of certain words or choosing more expressive ones, but her final version is remarkably close to her first effort, with lovely original imagery, for instance “I sweep my porch of pain.”

Isobel thought that the four sessions had not been sufficient to develop the potential of the smaller groups. Had we had the six sessions she suggested, there would have been more opportunity for her to interact with others whose concept of Divinity was more traditional. As it was, she said she enjoyed the workshop as a creative outlet. I
venture to guess that one transformative experience was a sensitization toward the use of “dark” and “light” images, so prevalent in her first hymn, and other stereotypes like them.

Joan:

Having missed two sessions due to illness, Joan offered to leave the course. However, she had been so involved in Session 1 that I did not want to lose her special insights as someone with a very conservative Roman Catholic background, and in the end this was the right decision. From her journaling I learned that Joan had just suffered six months of spiritual angst: “I’ve been at a crossroads in my life and it has been somewhat frightening. It’s been a real process of exploration, hurt, healing, and joy. I think the final result of my hymn speaks to where my head and heart are at.” After agonizing over finding a theme for her hymn, Joan wrote of one day sitting in meditative silence, open to “whatever was to come.” In what must have been a powerfully transformative experience, she recalled seeing a beautiful sunrise that morning and feeling “cared for and at peace. I wanted to capture that feeling in my hymn. What came out of me was a celebration of God’s love, and an acceptance of his calling.”

I did not see Joan’s hymn until shortly before the last session and our communal singing. I had no opportunity to work with her on punctuation, or the often bumpy text due to an occasionally mismatched accent between words and tune. However, this did not matter. The workshop participants were very moved by the quiet passion in Joan’s writing, and the genuine depiction of a troubled soul’s finding a place of peace. From the lively discussion at her table in Session 1, when her very traditional visualization of Satan and angels ran into the more liberal interpretations of the United Church, it was evident
that Joan might not alter her views for some time, if ever, but her thinking along different interpretative lines had been stimulated. She intends to explore United Church understandings with Rev. Black, and says of the workshop that “it simply reminded me that I need to invest time in practicing and reflecting on my faith.” There is no shortage of transformative experiences in Joan’s first attempt at hymn writing.

Alex:

Perhaps the most hard-working and unusual writer was Alex, whose drafts piled up as she wrestled with her text. Eager to engage with the challenge, she wrote four stanzas before becoming aware that there was no familiar tune to work with her interesting meter. At this point she was so invested in her ideas and her intriguing structural framework that she was unwilling to make changes to fit a tune, although her journaling shows many attempts at re-phrasing, trying various tunes, and counting syllables. Consequently she declared relief when her husband offered to write her a tune. I, too, was excited at the thought of an original melody, until I realized neither of them seemed very familiar with musical notation; to our mutual frustration, her list of letters representing notes was no help at all. Prepared to make it a “reading hymn” if necessary, I discussed her panentheistic theme with her, admired the last lines’ unifying repetition, questioned images (“running turtles”?) and helped to hone the stanzas’ progression of ideas: God in space, in the natural order, in human beings, with a summary of these in stanza four. In the end, Alex arrived at Session 4 with her tune written out in simple notation, leaving me to fill it in harmonically, and we were all able to sing her hymn to
her satisfaction. For someone who had consistently declared that it was tunes that were meaningful to her and that she ignored most hymn texts as irrelevant to her, Alex’s hymn is a remarkable inversion where text trumps a somewhat uneventful tune. “I was surprisingly attached to the words I wrote,” she declared when the questionnaire asked about any self-discoveries. It is tempting to hope that this experience may have led her to the transformation of a new appreciation of hymn texts, and curiosity about their relationship to the music.

Arija:

Her extremely stressful life at the time of the workshop left Arija with little time to work on a completely new hymn. Instead, she took one of her musical compositions for solo, choir and congregation and reworked it for congregational singing. The result is a highly poetic first stanza alluding to three biblical events: Isaiah’s vision of a blossoming wilderness, the Exodus crossing of the Red Sea, and Christ’s empty tomb. Without knowing what these are, or how these passages are linked by a theme of liberation, I suspect most singers would be puzzled at first by the images, though they would come to appreciate the beauty of the poetry and the meaning and depth of the content with familiarity. Arija hoped to write two more stanzas in a similar vein, “referencing David and Jesus’ birth,” but did not get around to it in time.
The sophistication of this song, which challenges certain criteria for a hymn, shows a scripturally astute mind at work, one unlikely to experience much spiritual transformation as a result of the workshop, and Arija confirmed this in the Feedback Questionnaire. For her, transformation came through other means and insights. These included discovering that small-group work could be enjoyable with a congenial set of partners: “I felt I learned more about the other participants and felt closer to them afterwards,” and that time management was not one of her strengths. She voiced appreciation for learning about the different eras of hymn writing, and that “the hymn writer is considered to be the lyricist – the tune seems secondary to authorship.” For someone whose primary identity is as a composer of music, and who tends to “tune out” words she does not like, this would be a critical learning, affecting her future writing for congregations. Arija also wrote regretfully of having “missed an opportunity” by relying on traditional themes and language rather than exploring new expressions, which would also be a valuable insight for her ongoing creative pursuits.

By writing eloquently and in some detail about her observations concerning the structure of the workshop and some of my personal tendencies as leader, Arija was instrumental in my own set of transformations, which will be discussed later.

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Madeleine Forell Marshall’s book *Common Hymnsense* (Chicago: GIA Publications Inc., 1995) is a study of how changing language idioms change the comprehensibility of hymn texts. “If hymns make no sense, we discourage attentive singing and might as well quit.” (10). The extended “Ooo” coda would also be a challenge.
Sloan:

The gregarious, fun-loving and creativity-seeking personality of Sloan is amply reflected in her hymn, “Joy in the Sunrise.” Apart from some minor adjustment for metrical reasons, she did not change anything in her first draft, merely adding, at my suggestion, a third stanza to round out the light and water images with ones of air. Her choice of tune, OLDHAM, which accompanies Walter Farquharson’s “Give to Us Laughter,” was an inspired choice for its light-hearted character. Sloan candidly admitted to writing within traditional themes and language, although she regretted that “my hymn was not as spiritually deep as others. I wonder if I should have dug deeper.” Although she said on the Feedback Questionnaire that most hymns did not give expression to her faith, she did not try to write a hymn text that would do so. Perhaps just being aware of this, and having acquired a few writing tools in the workshop, will help her to make another attempt some time. If nothing else, Sloan expressed joy “that I learned a lot about hymnology.” Every kind of learning is transformative.

Joy:

Joy’s creative writing background, and her struggles with depression, are evident in the moving hymn in which she addresses her preoccupation with doubt. In her journal she wrote of missing the comfort and certainty of her earlier concept of God, and feeling herself in a “state of unresolvedness.” Not seeing many hymns “that seriously question the whole faith thing” she explored this topic in three stanzas naming God in turn as

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Question, Mystery and Presence. There is pain in her longing for the light of certainty, but she is able to say also “Holy is the dark,” and hear God’s whisper that she is not alone. In writing “Perhaps I will have to live in a ‘state of mystery’?” and acknowledging on the questionnaire that she has discovered her theology to be closer to that of the United Church than she had thought, Joy has undergone both spiritual transformation and the transformation due to all she learned about the craft of hymn writing.

**Summary**

In this lengthy chapter I have described and analyzed the progression of each participant through the workshop experience, with a particular focus on the efficacy of the workshop design at each stage, and the various types of transformation each participant underwent.

It appears that the structure of the workshop is basically sound, meeting its teaching goals, but that some re-designing will strengthen it by eliminating in the participants the stress that derives from unnecessary confusion, especially at the beginning. Pointing out the crucial relationship between a hymn’s words and music from the very start would give amateur writers the metrical scaffold of the tune on which to build their text. Restructuring Session 1 by condensing certain items to allow more time for the abbreviated tour through hymnic eras would make for a more positive and meaningful learning experience for all participants.

Transformation occurred mainly in cognitive form, since in its present design the workshop does not include enough opportunity for discussion and interpersonal reflection. This is a weakness that building in a fifth session would be able to address. As
it was, the weightiest thinking happened in the writings of those who did journaling, and in the e-mail correspondence of those who wrote to me between sessions. Besides what they learned about hymns and how to write one, it seems that an increased awareness of hymnody in general, and a more positive shift in attitude toward the texts of hymns, was the most significant outcome of the workshop for this particular group of people.
Chapter 5  Conclusions And Implications

“Spirit God, be our breath, be our song,
Blow through us, bringing strength to move on . . .”\(^{208}\)

Preface

The impetus for this study was the recognition that hymns have considerable power to shape the faith of believers. Since the hymns dearest to many congregants’ hearts are often written with the language and imagery of a bygone era, one is tempted to conclude that these people’s personal theologies have probably not kept up with postmodern social and theological thinking either. If this is true, they will be at odds with others in their pew who have begun to question the words and concepts in many hymns, finding that they no longer give expression to what they actually believe. The biblical injunction to “sing a new song” is in many places of worship still met by “telling the old, old story” in equally old vocabulary, which reinforces such outmoded notions as an exclusively male deity or Christian triumphalism.\(^{209}\) Unsure of how to reconcile their doubts and contemporary ideals of justice with the texts they sing on Sunday, some choose to ignore the words for the most part and to be fed spiritually by the music alone.

With hymns so influential, I was curious to see whether they could be used as tools to challenge ordinary, untrained congregants to expand their theological thinking, and to give them, wherever they find themselves on the theological spectrum, an


\(^{209}\) The reader is reminded that these remarks are based on personal experience, and focused on United Church congregations.
opportunity to engage in theological reflection. Working with the premise that the most effective learning is action-based, I theorized that in the process of writing a hymn text themselves, individuals would find their critical thinking stimulated and experience various kinds of transformative growth.

First, however, they would need to learn how to go about writing a hymn. This study therefore had two goals: the creation and evaluation of a hymn-text writing workshop for laity, and an analysis of its effectiveness in fostering theological reflection and personal transformative experiences in the participants. In this final chapter I will review the different kinds of learning that took place, discuss the study’s significance and implications, and offer suggestions for further work in this area. Along the way I will be suggesting answers to the questions I posed in Chapter 1.210

**Learnings** – the workshop design.

I believe that the first goal was accomplished successfully. Judging from the fact that each participant wrote a hymn text which is technically solid and singable, Jane Vella’s criterion for accountable teaching was met: “How do they know they know? They just did it!”211 The hymns reflected varying degrees of writing experience in the participants, but all made individual progress in this activity that few had attempted before, and all agreed that they had learned new things about hymns in general. In Chapter 4 I discussed several areas that require revision for better focus on specific tasks.

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210 See page 15.

211 Vella, Berardinelli and Burrow, *How Do They Know They Know?* xii.
On the whole, however, it seems that this workshop structure includes all the elements necessary for teaching beginners the techniques, style and content of a typical hymn, as sung in United Church of Canada congregations.

The pedagogical foundations for the workshop were described in Chapter 2. Encompassing the holistic, transformative learning techniques taught by Jane Vella and Patricia Cranton, their major principles can be condensed into three. The first was the importance of trust and sound relationships between teacher and students. I believe that I was successful in establishing a non-judgmental atmosphere of safety, and trust in my competency as leader without exerting an imbalance of power. The small-group tasks allowed every voice to be heard and encouraged active engagement in the learning process. I respected the participants’ autonomy in making decisions regarding their writing; while I might often have done things differently, I tried to restrict myself to offering help with their ideas rather than imposing my own. There were a few instances where I failed in this, doing things that should have been done by the participants. A prime example was in Session 3, which ended with my reading aloud the texts of three hymns. While there was a practical consideration—a shortage of time—it would have been much closer to the philosophy of cooperative learning if three participants had done the reading.

The second, overarching principle was good workshop design. The dialogue which is the root of this method is dependent on a clearly stated sequence of learning tasks and well-constructed questions. In general, the workshop seemed to succeed in this as well, with the one exception of the overly lengthy task on hymn history in Session 1.
that needs to be restructured for greater accessibility for non-musical participants. While it might be advantageous to extend the workshop sessions to five in order to allow more time for interpersonal discussion and group reflection, I would first try to re-design the workshop by taking out tasks that contributed relatively less practical information for the time they took, even if they were interesting. As well, another time I would not allow myself to stray so easily from the program, as I did in Session 3. Had we done as directed and sung only the first verse of everyone’s hymn, just to share a sense of progress, we would not have had the loss of time that so negatively impacted the remainder of the session.

I was wrong to judge the Learning Covenant and the reading together of each day’s agenda unnecessary, perhaps even beneath the participants’ dignity. From their responses I learned that a few of them, at any rate, would have welcomed the intentional review. Despite their having the learning goals spelled out in the workbooks, they felt a bit swamped by information they had not yet had time to process, even though they were invited to ask. In a re-design I will ensure that the crucial role of a suitable tune to write to is mentioned early on. Not doing so caused several participants needless anxiety and may have resulted in a poorer product.

On the other hand, another time I might skip the directions to use sticky-notes for posting responses. This would depend in part on the age of the participants. A younger set might welcome the physicality of repeated trips to a wall or board, but in my experience older participants are more comfortable remaining seated most of the time.
Home assignments should be kept to a minimum, to respect participants’ busy lives. The “thinking questions” which I assigned between sessions for the stimulating of private reflection seemed to be problematic for some. It might be more useful to concentrate on the phone or e-mail correspondence with each individual, and to make progress on the hymns the only other expectation. Instead of post-session questions and lengthy feedback exercises it might be more instructive to end each session with a check list of learning tasks completed: e.g., 1. I can determine the meter of a hymn; 2. I can use the metrical index to find alternate tunes for a hymn text; and so forth. These would be worded to echo the tasks set out at the start of each session and provide participants with a gratifying sense of achievement. Such a self-evaluation tool would let participants see clearly what topics had been covered, and where they might want further instruction or explanation. It would also be very helpful in the case of missed sessions.

The three-ring binders are a good tool for keeping things orderly. However, the participants were right in criticising the Appendix as making for a lot of frustrating flipping back and forth. It would be better to position the work sheets, hymns, and exercise items wherever they come up in each session plan. Furthermore, I recommend presenting the binders complete at the first session. Those who wish can work or look ahead, absentees can catch up at home, and any adjustments the leader wants to make between sessions can still be made by inserting or replacing the relevant page(s). This would also eliminate the embarrassment and inefficiency of the leader’s forgetting an item at home, as I did.
The third major principle informing the design of this workshop was accountability. Vella considers this “one of the foremost principles of adult learning. . . . Accountability is a synthesis principle—the result of using all the other [eleven] principles as well as the beginning of the action.” As leader, I owed the participants a well-constructed workshop, good time management, a safe and enjoyable learning environment, and achievement of the promised learning objectives, including a successful hymn text of their own creation. They in turn were responsible for observance of the agreed-on Learning Covenant, which included active engagement with the exercises and faithful attendance.

A final observance: While the evening timeframe seemed to work well enough for the participants, I imagine that a daytime series might be even more productive, with rested bodies and minds engaging in the work. I envision a series of three Saturday mornings, 9am-1pm with two ten-minute breaks; the first half of the morning could be devoted to learning technical information and the second half to small-group interaction and actual hymn writing practice. The present arrangement is crowded, and the participants felt pressure from covering too much material in too little time. Precious time could also be saved if the first session began a half hour earlier, with the round of introductions and then a prompt start on the actual work at the stated beginning time.

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212 Vella, Learning to Listen, Learning to Teach, 25.
Learnings – the participants.

In the course of the workshop, the participants considered what distinguishes a hymn from other types of song, and they discovered that hymns have a long history of evolution. They studied and compared the indexes of two hymnals with respect to thematic content, and learned to determine meter and how to use this understanding to find alternate tunes for hymn texts. They became more aware of the positive difference a suitable tune can make to a hymn, and discussed the challenges of gendered language and images for people and for God. Other issues examined were stereotypical imagery, and the various justice implications of altering problematic texts of traditional hymns. In the process of writing their own hymns the participants also learned to work with meter, rhyme, text/tune-matching, sequential structure, and were encouraged to think carefully about the focus, theology and purpose of their text.

Learning facts and skills is a relatively easily measured kind of transformation; every participant claimed some of it. More difficult to gauge is transformation of a personal or spiritual nature, the outcome of reflection, dialogue with others, and the acquisition of new insights, yet that was the second of my two goals. To some degree, everyone experienced this kind of transformation also, as when William wrote that hymn writing “has helped me access my experience of God,” a rather profound statement. Some said they had learned a lot about hymns, but felt that nothing had changed in their theological outlook. Most had learned new things about their faith orientation or themselves. A spiritual experience that led from a turbulent inner life to a new sense of peace; recognition of an affinity with United Church theology; being surprised that one
does care about the words of hymns and not just the music – these and other instances of
self-discovery were moments of transformative significance resulting from theological
reflection.

Joan’s pondering that she felt she had a “less passive approach [to hymns] than
before” and that hymns were “personal again” thanks to what she had learned speaks of
serious reflection, and offers the hope of continued engagement with hymns as an
expression of her faith. Susan, still referring to humanity as “man” at one point, admitted
to her traditional language but wished she had been able to use more “sophisticated”
ideas and images because she was also struggling to make sense of “some key parts of the
Christian faith” that smacked to her of “wishful thinking.” Some transforming insights
had little to do with theology: Arija, already an accomplished poet, found out about
herself that she was “terrible at time management!” Merely the interaction with each
other as they wrestled with learning tasks and listened to each other’s views expressed
had the potential for spiritual transformation based on new ideas they had never thought
about before. From the participants’ email musings, journaling, and questionnaire
responses, it appears to me that theological reflection was definitely stimulated, albeit to
varying degrees of profundity.

It would have been unrealistic to expect radical philosophical changes in such a
short period of time. Most participants stayed within the safe boundaries of familiar
language and theology, which are deeply habitual. But the writing did force them to
examine their beliefs and assumptions, even if unconsciously. Many small, quiet
realizations, and a heightened awareness of hymns in general, have sufficient potential
for further reflection and reaction down the road. I am led to wonder how the workshop might impact the participants as they go forward. Robert Kinast makes a distinction between “praxis” and “application.” The former is behavioural enactment based on the results of learning and reflection; the latter is any change in theological perspective as a result, thus informing praxis. An example of praxis might be the chair of the Worship Committee now finding it easier to choose an appropriate alternate hymn tune for the start of a meeting, if she likes a certain text but the given tune is unfamiliar. Application of what has been learned would be if Joan were to find herself increasingly comfortable with the theology of the United Church as a result of her reflections both during and after the course, and decided to investigate the possibility of a transfer of her membership.

Perhaps the most significant and lasting transformation experienced by all the participants was the empowerment that came with the successful completion of an actual hymn. When Susan’s hymn was sung by her congregation at a baptism, it lifted her effort from an exercise into the realm of creative offering, a sharing of her deepest spiritual beliefs. That had to be an incredibly powerful affirmation of both her faith and her ability as a writer. I would be surprised if she did not try her hand at this form of self-expression again. Even those who may not hear their hymn sung in worship now share the increased self-confidence that came with writing one that could be so used. At the very least, their mastery of a new challenge will have resulted in raised self-esteem.

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214 This is a theoretical example only – I am not for a moment suggesting it as a hoped-for action.
**Learnings** – the researcher.

Collaborative, or quantum, learning is potentially as transforming for the leader as for the students. This teaching model is still fairly new to me, and to my knowledge has not been used as the template for a comprehensive hymn writing workshop; the opportunity to test its effectiveness was one reason why I chose it for my study. I have already mentioned structural changes that I believe will improve the workshop. However, even the best designed course will suffer from a poorly equipped teacher, so I used feedback from the participants to assist me in some honest self-assessment and learning for purposes of my own ministry of hymnological education.

It did not surprise me that a lifelong habit of teacher-directed leadership was difficult to erase. In spite of my best intentions to foster self-directed learning in the workshop participants, I found myself repeatedly wanting to impose knowledge on them rather than presenting the learning tasks and then getting out of the way. Understanding the principles of dialogic learning, and believing in the approach, is not enough; only with further practice will I improve at designing and implementing future workshops. It goes without saying that another leader using this material but without experience in this mode of teaching will need to first become familiar with its principles through something like a Leader’s Manual, something I have yet to write.

It was important to hear from one participant that I have a habit of asking leading questions, hoping for a specific answer rather than enabling free responses. I expect that this is again the product of a career spent in teaching in the traditional style, where answers are generally either right or wrong. I was aware of this danger and I do not
believe I erred excessively in offering such suggestive responses as “Are you sure?” According to my wise critic, however, my desire to create a positive and relaxing atmosphere with comments like “That’s easy,” or “You know this already, I bet,” tended to backfire and to produce anxiety in participants who did not find it easy or know it. Clearly there must have been times when I failed to maintain the necessary neutral stance as a resource person, and slipped back into my accustomed role of captain of the ship.

I was grateful, therefore, for numerous comments which assured me that my good intentions had been recognized and appreciated. This pertained particularly to the extensive communication by e-mail in which I did one-on-one work with each individual on their hymn. Here my task-driven personality was a lesser impediment to self-directed learning, since the element of participant interaction was absent and I was responding to, instead of leading, the exchange of ideas. However, it bears repeating that the most successful leader of this workshop will be one who is comfortable with ambiguity and the relinquishing of control; one who has no set expectations as to outcome, only commitment to the process. Good people skills and a genuine love for the subject at hand are assets that will vary from leader to leader but that should be present to a fair degree if the experience is to be a positive one for the participants. Having put themselves into the leader’s hands, they need to feel they are in a safe, non-judgmental environment where everyone’s thoughts and opinions are equally respected and valued.

A major learning for me was that certain assumptions with which I began this project need to be revised. The main premise on which my workshop was based was that many, if not most, United Church worshipers need an updating in theology. While I
believe that it still holds true that people’s faith is shaped to a greater or lesser extent by the hymns they sing.\textsuperscript{215} It appears that progressive theological thinking has already reached more people in the pews than I had thought, and that the words of the hymns they sing weekly are not necessarily representative of what they truly believe.\textsuperscript{216} Although the workshop at one point sparked some lively debate over the fairness of altering old hymn texts to make them agree with today’s concepts of justice toward women, the marginalized, the aged and so forth, there was full agreement on the need for inclusive language, a broader palette of metaphors for God, and a wider range of topics in hymnody to address contemporary concerns. In fact, the violation of a poet’s intentions and implicit rights was seen as a justice matter in itself. The solution most participants were most happy with was the adding of new hymns to the repertoire, and gradually dropping beloved old ones as they become too fraught, an example being "Onward, Christian Soldiers"\textsuperscript{217} with its blatantly military imagery. For some, language was not even that crucial an issue; they claimed to enjoy the singing of hymns more for musical

\textsuperscript{215} For example, in the October 2015 issue of \textit{The Verse}, the monthly newsletter of The Hymn Society in the United States and Canada, it was reported that a mission statement had been crafted which reads in part: “We believe that the holy act of singing together heals brokenness, shapes faith, transforms lives, renews peace.”

\textsuperscript{216} This was certainly true for Eden Valley United, a congregation of well-read and educated individuals. It may be less true in other congregations, or among different sets of participants from the same church. Had I relied only on the fairly traditional hymns my workshop participants wrote, I might still be tempted to assume in them a conservative theology to match the hymns in \textit{Voices United} and those which they named as favourites. However, from our conversations, their journaling and their questionnaire responses it is obvious to me that on a deeper level theirs is a theology in flux, encompassing doubt, searching, questioning, and a growing sense of God as unfathomable mystery. What is true for them is probably true as well for many others.

\textsuperscript{217} “Onward, Christian Soldiers, Marching As to War”. Text: Sabine Baring-Gould, 1834-1924.
and emotional reasons. If they still write in traditional language and imagery, I suspect that this is related primarily to their being unaccustomed to writing poetry at all and needing to start with familiar concepts and language as they wrestle with technique.

Significance of the Study

For the participants

The workshop influenced each participant in different ways. Some, for whom writing poetry was in itself a new skill, had only time and creative energy for learning writing technique, not venturing further afield into new ways to image God or ponder their personal theological stance. Others, comfortable with the technical aspects, explored new themes (Kenneth) or language (Arija.) Based on their collective enthusiasm for the exercises involving hymns in historical context and use of the indexes to find appropriate alternate tunes for texts, I suspect that all of them will approach their hymnals with greater appreciation and understanding, which will give them personal satisfaction. Alex in particular will, by her own admission, be more attentive to the words and not just the music and emotional import of the hymns she sings. They will all have grown in self-esteem as a result of their successful hymn writing, especially if their hymn is ever sung in worship, as was Susan’s. While it is of course impossible to guess at long-term influences of the workshop on each individual, I think it is safe to say that not one of the

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As noted earlier, hymns are not always intended to be rational theological treatises; they serve a variety of functions, including the performative one of liturgical ritual. However, it does seem very obvious that for most worshipers the music of a hymn is the element that decides to what degree the hymn elicits an emotional response and consequently more attention to the text.
participants has been left unchanged in some manner. Not least of the positive results is what Arija voiced in saying that she “learned more about the other participants and felt closer to them afterwards.” Hymns, and apparently hymn writing, can build community.

For the host church

If nothing else, Eden Valley United now has two co-chairs of its Worship and Music Committee who have a greatly expanded understanding of what a hymn is and how hymns function in worship. Together with their fellow participants, they will form a small nucleus of leaders in the congregation whose brief but intense training has augmented their vocabulary and understanding of hymns, encouraging more knowledgeable and confident dialogue with their minister and music director on this subject. As such, it is a small act of communal empowerment. It is likely that through casual conversation some of the participants’ learning will transfer to others in the congregation. Kenneth has even suggested making this workshop a regular feature in Eden Valley’s adult education offerings. If that were to happen, over time the Eden Valley community would undergo significant growth in its understanding and appreciation of hymns and their value as expressions of their faith.

For the wider Church community:

Because it uses United Church hymnals as primary resource, the workshop would be of the most immediate usefulness to members of that denomination. However, with some adaptation it should be accessible to others as well; certainly the basic outline of sequential learning tasks and the universal elements (meter, rhyme etc.) can remain the
same. Specific hymn references would have to be cross-referenced in other hymnals, or similar hymns substituted. The dialogic teaching method has been around for a while, but I am not aware of a published congregational hymn writing workshop that uses the small-group self-directed learning process as structural basis, or theological reflection as a conscious element in its design and an expanded theological vocabulary and imagery as one of its stated aims. As such, this constitutes a potential original contribution of the research and its workshop.

As a low-cost, readily implemented workshop it might prove useful as a tool for such organizations as the Hymn Society in the United States and Canada. I would like to think that, with the addition of a teachers’ manual, it could be used by church leaders of many backgrounds, especially in outlying areas not often visited by traveling clinicians. Congregations could use it as part of their adult education offerings. It might be a training resource in seminary programs such as a Master of Sacred Music degree. In all such venues, budding hymn writers would be encouraged to move beyond traditional modes of expression and to challenge both themselves and the singers of their hymn texts with some of the ideas evolving in what is variously called Progressive Christianity or postmodern theology. For congregants like those at Eden Valley, many of whom are already thinking along such lines, the workshop would serve to validate and further their searching and experimentation.

For the researcher

This workshop was as much a transformative exercise for me as for the participants. In practical terms, I learned how to construct a workshop using dialogic
parameters instead of traditional lecture-style transfer of information. This seemed easy enough on paper, but I discovered in its application how difficult it is to change lifelong teaching habits; being reminded of my occasional failures by my participants was salutary. It will take practice to become more adept at process thinking wherein I receive the learners’ collective wisdom as equally valid with the views I hold myself, and the learning journey itself as more important than the end product. When I choose this style of teaching in the future, I will need to become more comfortable with ambiguity and mystery, and with a broader definition of spirituality than I have held in the past. I will want to continue upholding certain standards in the technique of hymn text writing—a meter either works with the music or it doesn’t—but to encourage exposure to a broad range of theological views, honouring individual positions even if they do not agree with my own. Humility and scrupulous self-reflection must be necessary companions on that journey; it is so tempting to want others to think as I do.

It has been a pleasant surprise to find my prejudices about the theological sophistication of my fellow United Church worshipers challenged. While personal experience convinces me that progressive theology is not yet the norm for many, in my own church as in others, neither does the situation appear as dire as I had postulated.

Speaking broadly, my personal teaching ministry as it is enacted in hymn text writing workshops has been enhanced and strengthened. It will continue to be challenged by changes in hymnody that arise long after the project’s conclusion. I hope to build on this experience to be a more pastoral, effective and less dogmatic leader, as well as a more creative writer of hymn texts myself.
Implications and next steps

Traditional educational systems have relied largely on the regurgitation of facts, and been suspicious of creative thought that strayed too far from the knowledge that was to be imparted. This workshop is an attempt to balance the communication of a certain amount of necessary information with an emphasis on guided reflection to elicit theological self-inquiry.

To return to the questions which I asked of the project in Chapter 1, I have not found answers to all of them. As an exercise in qualitative research, it is vital to remember that this was a single-occasion, context-specific study, with one particular set of participants, and that the workshop would have to be repeated many times, with different demographics, before any quantitative conclusions could be generalized. I cannot say, for instance, whether it will always tend to be people in positions of leadership in their congregations who find such a course of interest, though this seemed to be the case at Eden Valley. I would like to know more about who is attracted to hymn writing, and equally who is not, and why. It would be interesting to compare the results of such a workshop with a mixture of participants from different denominations, perhaps from both evangelical and from theologically progressive churches. My guess is that this would stimulate considerably more lively discussion and mutual learning, as we saw briefly when Joan was amazed to discover how the United Church thinks of the devil or hell.

This one case study did seem to support my conjecture that the average age of participants would be fifty-plus. However, it is not at all clear whether this is related to
interest, to the fact that seniors, being retired, have more leisure time to pursue adult education projects, or to some other factor.\textsuperscript{219} Most of my participants were involved in education in some way or another; this raises the question: Are teachers more likely to seek further learning? The sample was too small to determine whether it would always be a majority of female participants, as it was in this workshop. Lois Lamdin’s studies would support that thesis\textsuperscript{220} with concrete statistics, but she did not specifically look at hymn text writing, admittedly perhaps a rather esoteric activity.

Even in this limited sample it was evident that the reasons why people sign up for such a course, and what they hope to get out of it, differ considerably among individuals. A love of hymn singing, however, for a variety of reasons, seems to be a common denominator, and learning more about this valued worship activity was a hope expressed by most of my participants. It is important, I think, to know that a number of the participants were emphatic in their preference for a hymn’s music over the text. It appeared from various comments that they were prepared to ignore the text entirely if it did not agree with their theological views, but the tune was very important to them in its emotional impact. Further, with few exceptions they expressed a significant preference for up-beat, rhythmically lively tunes. This whole issue of the contribution of its tune to the acceptance of a hymn’s message is one that seems to me extremely needful of further

\textsuperscript{219} Seminal work by James Fowler (\textit{Stages of Faith}, 1981) and James Gollnick (\textit{Religion and Spirituality in the Life Cycle}, 2005) suggests that as humans age they tend to progress through a series of stages in spiritual maturation, from an ego-centric, ideological worldview in youth to an ever more universal one that is tolerant of diversity and open to an understanding of God as mystery. Does it take a certain amount of life experience and maturity before expressing one’s faith through hymn writing becomes attractive?

study; I would even venture to suggest that a workshop with hymn tunes as its focus would be an enlightening adjunct to the present one on texts.\textsuperscript{221}

Because the participants in my study worship at a church where the theology preached appears to be quite progressive, the majority of them already think of the Deity in the kind of language and imagery that I thought I might need to introduce: God as unknowable mystery, as all-pervasive spirit, as creative force, as the essence of all that is good and true. Some were obviously comfortable with these concepts, a few others embraced them more hesitantly, slipping back into more familiar, anthropological expressions of the sort they still encountered frequently in their hymn book, *Voices United*. To answer my question “How do United Church worshipers think of God today?” with any degree of integrity would require many repeats of the workshop, with a broader sampling of participants. A survey would probably get at this question much more quickly and easily.

The design of this workshop, with its series of cumulative learning tasks, is in my opinion appropriate for its purpose, particularly the second half where the technical aspects of hymn writing have been covered and participants are expected to engage with each other in small groups for discussion and reflection. In this format lies its strength, but also its weakness. As I discovered myself, it is difficult for a passionate teacher/leader to readily abandon their inner imperative to impart information and lead discussions in a

\textsuperscript{221} I am not suggesting a tune writing workshop, which would require considerable prerequisite musical training, although such workshops do exist for those with that skill set. Rather, I envision turning a book on this topic, such as Don Salier’s excellent *Music and Theology*, into a workshop companion for one such as mine on hymn texts, featuring appreciation instead of creation of tunes.
certain direction. Leaders trained in dialogic methods will find this format easier to work within; others will need to acquire a level of comfort with it before they can hope to be very effective. A training manual for leaders is therefore a necessity, and a resource that I hope to write as an addendum before offering the workshop for wider use.

Another potential weakness is the length of the workshop. While the eight or possibly ten hours it encompasses, with a week between sessions, allow for the inclusion of a comprehensive amount of material, practical exercises, time for discussion and thoughtful individual work, most situations could not accommodate such a timeframe. The sessions might conceivably be offered on one day, or a weekend, but this would eliminate the valuable in-between time to write with reflective care. I therefore see the present format restricted for the most part to church adult education programs.

Since this is a workshop on hymns, it is almost inevitable that some theological reflection will result in every participant. It is impossible, however, to predict to what degree new insights will be stimulated; this will depend on the background, interests and personality of the individual. My conjecture is that there is bound to be a positive correlation between the breadth of divergence between the theological stance of the individual and that of the group’s average. In other words, it seems reasonable to me to suppose that attention, and consequently reflection, will be greatest if the learner encounters information that is very new, surprising and unexpected. This hypothesis is outside the scope of this study, but would be interesting to test.

A similar statement can be made about what a typical participant can expect to learn about hymns, God, and themselves: it will depend on many factors, including their
experience level at the outset, their personal inquisitiveness and interest in the topic, and to what extent they are given to introspection. Having said that, it is also the case that the hymnologically-based approach of this experience did not privilege theological theory over hymn practice, per se, so the degree of theological reflection was sometimes difficult to ascertain apart from the resulting hymn texts. But this need not be a bad thing for theological reflection, insofar as it is best viewed as a result of practice. Finally, one can perhaps generalize only by suggesting the obvious, that learning and transformative experience will be optimal in individuals who invest maximum curiosity and effort.

Despite mixed results, I believe that the most immediate value of this workshop lies in its structured approach for teaching laity about what makes a hymn; having to write one themselves is an optimal means of learning. In the small groups that characterize the format of this workshop, participants can explore faith issues as their own particular needs dictate. Every new thought, knowledge or skill is an instance of transformation.

The question of transferability has already been touched on. With some adaptation to other hymnals, and the use of a leader’s manual, I see no reason why this workshop could not be used in other denominations.

**Conclusions**

I began this thesis with three stories, and want to return to them as I conclude. The first was an example of a hymn’s influence on one person’s faith formation; in the course of this workshop more evidence of such a dynamic came to light. The participants
generally wrote their texts in the language of their list of favourite hymns, rather than attempting to express themselves in creative new ways that may have come closer to their theological stance. Thus, not only had their hymn repertoire shaped their faith, but it can also be said that their faith shaped their hymn preferences, as seen in their writing. Those participants who owned up to doubt and searching, like Joan or Joy, had a harder time naming God in their texts than did those like Sloan or John, who were apparently content to refer to God in familiar “Lord” language, and who used quite traditional vocabulary and ideas. Alex, the scientist who called herself a panentheist, found it most difficult to articulate her theology in hymn form.

Both those overly comfortable in their theology and those searching for words to express their unknowing (like the woman in my second story) would benefit from a new hymn book, one that embraces the intent of the supplement More Voices and is proactive in addressing the needs of a new generation of believers with hymns that are not only musically attractive but theologically and linguistically just and relevant. At the twenty-year mark since publication, Voices United is approaching the end of its “best before” date. Many of the issues identified as problematic or lacking in current hymn-singing practice could be dealt with in a new hymnal.

Not all the transformations recorded in the workshop were as dramatic as that of the woman in my third story, but all were genuine and significant. The fact that most participants said they felt they had not made any discoveries about themselves but qualified this immediately with “but” statements suggests that they did not recognize their acknowledged learnings as new or transformative when in fact, by definition, they
were. Learning results in change, and change is transformative. It might be a good addition to the workshop design to include, toward the end, a discussion on this topic. Questions might include “How are you different now from before the workshop? What did you learn that will make you approach hymns differently from now on? Can you name one new theological insight you had in the course of the workshop? What do you think you may still retain from this experience ten years from now?” This might spark a discussion of the learning – transfer – impact sequence in Vella’s theory.

The theological reflection component that overtly distinguishes this workshop must surely be implicit in any course dealing with hymns. Even if it is not recognized as such, the impact of engaged, enthusiastic participation in the group process of communal learning has potential theological import. We cannot know what seeds are planted along the way, or where the journey will lead its participants, only that there is integrity in the process itself. That ten people, most of whom had never written poetry or a hymn before, each produced a fine congregational song with obvious emotional investment, says to me that learning and introspection took place. The bottom line is that all have become more aware of hymns in general. Their pride in their accomplishment is an added incentive to continued involvement with hymns.

I began this project with a bias: the conviction that most United Church congregants are still theologically “behind the times” in their language and thinking, due in large part to an emotional attachment to the hymns learned in childhood and youth. It was my intention to create a workshop in hymn text writing, postulating that in this exercise individuals would be encouraged to examine their personal theologies and
perhaps learn to broaden their traditional language and imagery of The Holy, while at the same time acquiring the basics of hymn construction and content.

What I discovered was that my presumption had perhaps been somewhat naïve. Unless my host congregation is a unique exception, many people in the pews are already thinking inclusively, preferring hymns that address modern social concerns and justice-related issues, and have moved beyond an image of God as exclusively male, omnipotent and judgmental. They are already singing, or open to singing, a “new song.” Those who still relate to an anthropomorphic deity (Lord, my companion, etc.) are at least willing to consider expanding their views. This may not hold true for denominations outside the United Church, or in certain congregations where traditional language and imagery are still the norm and used by clergy and parishioners alike, but it was instructive to see to what extent United Church worshipers are comfortable with postmodern parameters in their theology, particularly in the abandonment of dogmatic certainties.

I would like to think that my workshop will be found useful, and I am profoundly indebted to the participants who graciously allowed me to test it on them. Of us all, I am the one who learned and was changed the most by the experience.

S.D.G.
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**Readings in Hymn Writing**


Foundational Reading


Appendices

A) Informal consent by the minister of the host church
B) Recruitment poster
C) Phone interview guide
D) Letter of welcome to the participants
D1) Intake questionnaire
D2) Letter of information and request for informed consent
E) Formal administrative consent by the host church
F) The Workshop
G) The participants’ hymns
H) Guide for focus group discussion
I) Feedback questionnaire
J) Ethics approval
K) Thesis proposal
Hi Lydia - all green lights when we reviewed the program today at our staff team meeting. I will co-ordinate with Wayne Strongman (Music Director) to set up a chance for the three of us to meet and hear some more - and I'd like to get our Worship/Music committee excited about it (meets next week) - but we can safely proceed.

When would you like to offer this? Our usual adult programming night is Thursday, but we would not need to be restricted to this. We are affected by two weeks of March Break if we wait too long.

talk to you soon,

Doug
Appendix B: Recruitment poster

A Hymn-Writing Workshop

If you are interested in learning more about hymns, what makes a “good” hymn, how to match words to appropriate tunes, how to use the many indexes in the back of the hymnal – and would like to try your hand at writing a hymn of your own! – a special workshop is coming your way.

Lydia Pedersen is working on a Doctor of Ministry degree at Emmanuel College; the subject of her thesis is just such a workshop, and she is offering it to the congregation of [blank]. On four consecutive <Wednesday > evenings in April she will lead an informative, entertaining and productive evening course to stimulate small-group discussions on matters of spirituality and theology and to guide the writing of hymn texts (to familiar tunes – no musical knowledge is required!) The hymns will be featured in a worship context at a later date.

There is a maximum enrolment of 12 to allow for plenty of interaction and mutual encouragement of everyone’s efforts. If you are interested, please speak to Rev. [blank], or call Lydia at 416-236-5085. You can also e-mail her at lydia.pedersen@sympatico.ca.

* * *

Lydia Pedersen, BA, BMus, MEd, has served the United Church in many capacities. She has recently retired from 30 years as organist and choir director at Royal York Road United Church. During that time she co-founded the musician support group now known as Music United, and was Chair of the Music Subcommittee for the group tasked with producing Voices United. She has served as Music Editor of the United Church worship resource Gathering, and is an active executive member of the Hymn Society. Lydia leads hymn sings, handbell and music workshops across Ontario. Her hymn texts are found in Voices United, More Voices, and other hymn resources. She is currently a doctoral student in the Toronto School of Theology.

Appendix C: Phone interview guide
• Delighted that you are interested! What caught your attention in the advertising of this workshop?
• What do you hope to gain from this experience?
• Tell me a little about yourself: have you written poetry/hymn texts before? Are you a musician? What is your primary occupation?
• Are the time commitment and the distance to church manageable for you?
• What initial questions or concerns do you have?
• You will receive a letter of introduction in the mail with detailed explanations, a short questionnaire to help me to know you better, and a consent form; I would appreciate your returning the last two in the stamped, self-addressed envelope included as soon as you can.
• Thank you. I hope that after you have had a chance to review all the material you will still be excited about this workshop and choose to participate.
• If for any reason you decide that you are unable or unwilling to continue with this, please phone or e-mail me so that your place can be given to someone else.
• I enjoyed talking with you and hope I may look forward to meeting you in person!
Appendix D: Letter of welcome to the participants

March 31, 2015

Dear participant:

Welcome to the workshop Sing a New Song! This course will focus on a guided process of learning to craft your own hymn, during which there will be continuous opportunities to reflect on and discuss spiritual questions with other participants. At the conclusion of the four two-hour sessions we will have an evaluation session at which we will also plan for a public sharing of the hymns we will have created. Our sessions will be Wednesday evenings, 7:30-9:30 pm, starting on April 8 and ending April 29. There is no prerequisite writing experience, only your enthusiasm for this shared adventure.

To assist me in shaping the learning activities for this course in the most effective manner I would ask you to take a little time to complete the attached questionnaire and return it to me before our first session. This will give me an idea of your present knowledge and skills on which to build; it will also serve as a baseline for you to celebrate your learning and growth at the end of the workshop.

Please read carefully also the Information and Consent Form included, making sure you understand and consent to the outlined procedures listed therein before signing and returning it to me, along with the questionnaire. This may all seem rather formal for a church-based workshop, but what you will be participating in is the project toward my Doctor of Ministry degree through the Toronto School of Theology which is affiliated with the University of Toronto, and these procedures are standard requirements to safeguard ethics and privacy issues. Please feel free to contact me at any time with questions, at 416-236-5085 or lydia_pedersen@sympatico.ca

An important feature of our time together will be working in smaller groups to facilitate the exchange of ideas and mutual assistance with our hymn writing. So come prepared to listen to each other, to be heard in turn, to learn and wonder and create in an atmosphere of friendly support. All necessary materials will be provided – all you need to bring is an open mind and a questing spirit.

Thank you for returning the two documents mentioned above. I look forward to seeing you at United Church on Wednesday, April 8 at 7:30 pm.

Warmly,

Lydia

Appendix D1: Intake questionnaire
1. Name 3 of your favourite hymns: -

2. Name one hymn you do not like. Why is that? .........

3. Have you written poetry before? ................. A hymn? .................

4. If yes, what did you find the most challenging aspect of the writing?

5. How comfortable are you with the use of the various indexes at the back of a hymn book?
   - I know my way around and use them regularly.
   - I use the Titles index to locate hymns.
   - I have never used any of the indexes.

6. Have you ever wished there were a hymn for a specific situation or need, and you couldn't find one? If so, describe that need:

7. In one or two sentences, describe what God is like for you.

Members
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University of St. Michael's College – Roman Catholic, Basilians • University of Trinity College – Anglican • Wycliffe College – Anglican, Evangelical

Affiliates
Conrad Grebel University College – Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre – Menno • Huron University College – Anglican
Institute for Christian Studies – Reformed • Waterloo Lutheran Seminary – Evangelical Lutheran
8. How did you come to think of God in this way? Were hymns a part of shaping your beliefs?

9. What drew you to sign up for this workshop?

10. Identify one or more hopes you have for this course.

Please feel free to offer any other comments below. Thank you for taking the time to complete and return this form.
Appendix D2: Letter of information and request for informed consent

Dear participant:

Thank you for your interest in the workshop Sing a New Song! By your participation you will be a subject in my Doctor of Ministry project, the design and testing of a hymn-writing course for United Church congregations. I am working through the Toronto School of Theology (Emmanuel College), which is affiliated with the University of Toronto. This study combines two goals: guiding participants in the techniques involved in writing an original hymn, and offering them opportunities for dialogue on matters of faith. I am interested in learning whether the hands-on activity of hymn text writing can stimulate spiritual reflection and result in various kinds of new theological insights.

This is a workshop designed for lay people. No musical or writing experience is required; clergy, professional church musicians and theological academics will be excluded. As principal researcher, I have designed the sequential learning tasks which you will follow in small groups under my direction, and I will be taking notes on your progress, your questions and observations as we work together. I will ask you to respond to brief questionnaires after each class, and a comprehensive questionnaire at the end. Most of your actual hymn writing will be done at home, based on what we learned in our sessions; I will be available at all times by phone or e-mail for information or help. Class size will be restricted to twelve participants, to allow for maximum engagement of everyone.

The workshop is divided into four evening sessions of two hours each, one week apart. This is intended to allow you ample time for working on your hymn, responding to brief questionnaires, and writing journal notes on your own progress, with questions or discoveries you may have acquired. At the conclusion of the formal sessions you will be invited to participate in an audio-recorded group de-briefing interview, and to fill out a comprehensive questionnaire to be mailed in. We will also discuss how we might share our hymns with the church community afterwards.

Although everyone’s full participation is important for my study, your involvement is voluntary and you may refuse to answer any question or participate in any activity at any time, and withdraw from the workshop at any point, without penalty of any kind. Our working environment is deliberately structured to be warmly supportive and enjoyable, but in the event that you experience distress of any sort you are invited to discuss it frankly with me or with Rev. [REDACTED]. Any questions around your rights as participants in a study may be directed to the Office of Research Ethics at ethics.review@utoronto.ca or 416-946-3273.

There is no cost to you for this course, but neither is there compensation being offered for your participation. I am hoping that the joy of learning and your pride in a hymn you have written will be their own reward.

Confidentiality of all data generated will be respected throughout the workshop and thereafter. All information offered, in a session, in interviews, from written responses to questionnaires and journal writings, or from the audio-taped group review, will be kept by me and accessed by me alone until I write my thesis. Your name will be encoded with a

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Affiliates
Conrad Grebel University College – Toronto Metropolitan Theological Centre – Memoriae • Huron University College – Anglican
Institute for Christian Studies – Reformed • Waterloo Lutheran Seminary – Evangelical Lutheran
pseudonym and referred to in that manner in all my documentation, and in all potential future talks or journal articles by me. You have the right to access my records pertaining to your own file at any time, but not to any other participant's. However, your hymn itself will be assigned copyright protection under your own name and unless you choose not to have it performed in a public venue, your church community and whomever you share the hymn with will know it as yours.

All participants will be mailed a summary of my research results as soon as I have had a chance to write them. You are welcome to question anything and request an adjustment if you disagree with any of my observations.

Having said all this, I want to reassure you that there will be nothing clinical about our work together. We will sing, discuss, laugh, learn, ponder, and emerge at the end as proud hymn writers! I hope you will choose to stay the course; in that event, please sign the consent form below and return it to me along with your completed questionnaire.

Thank you – I am so looking forward to meeting you!

Lydia Pedersen

Informed Consent

Having read and understood the information pertaining to participation in Lydia Pedersen’s Workshop Sing a New Song!, I hereby give my consent for the collection and use of data generated by me, subject at all times to my review and approval.

Signed: ........................................

Date: ........................................
Appendix E: Administrative Consent

As representative of [Redacted] United Church, I hereby give consent to

LYDIA PEDERSEN

to use this building as the venue for her workshop *Sing a New Song!* which will involve
volunteer members of our congregation.

Dates for the four sessions are Wednesdays, April 8 to 29, 2015.

The sessions will run from 7:30 – 9:30 pm. Lydia will have access to the site from 6:30 – 9:30 pm.

The room used will be the upstairs church school hall, with the use of the piano and whiteboard
or flipchart. Tables and chairs will be provided.

Ms. Pedersen will have the use of kitchen facilities for making tea.

There will be no charges for use of the facilities.

Any special requests or changes required by Ms Pedersen will go through me for approval.

Signed……………………………………….. (minister, [Redacted] United Church)

Date ………………………………………….

Appendix F: The Workshop
Sing a New Song!
Theological Reflection Based in Hymn Text Writing:
A Workshop

Lydia Pedersen  Lydia.pedersen@sympatico.ca
April 2015  416-236-5085

Questions that this workshop will attempt to address will include:

1. What are the basic elements of hymn design?
2. How do hymn text and melody relate to each other for optimal effect?
3. How is God portrayed in the hymns we sing in our own context?
4. How are people portrayed in the hymns we sing in our own context?
5. Where are some tensions between postmodern culture and traditional hymn texts?
6. How is the natural world, and our relation to it, portrayed in selected hymns?
7. What in our hymnody do we find difficult or no longer possible to believe?
8. What issues of modern life or faith are under-represented in our hymnody?
9. What are some new insights, images for God, or experiences of connection with the Holy that the participants have gained in this course?
10. What have participants discovered about themselves?

Learning Objectives

Session One - Introduction and Hymn Themes

By the end of this session participants will have
• Introduced themselves to the other participants;
• Shared their expectation of this workshop, and a story of how a hymn helped to shape their faith;
• Reviewed and agreed on a class learning covenant;
• Proposed a definition of “hymn”;
• Named characteristics common to hymns of several given historical eras;
• Compared the topical indexes of two recent hymnals.
• Listed themes or concerns they consider inadequately represented in these hymnals;
• Listened to an explanation of and sung the hymn “Joyful is the Dark”;
• Taken home two assignments: to complete and return an e-mail feedback questionnaire, and to bring to the next session a proposed theme for their hymn.

Session Two - Working with Meter and Tunes

By the end of this session participants will have
• Explored the set of indexes at the back of *Voices United*;
• Identified all items of information on a typical page in the hymnal;
• Worked out the meter for 5 selected texts;
• Participated in a group exercise on text-tune matching;
• Explained why not all text/tune combinations work;
• Named the principle that determines whether a metrically compatible tune is singable or not;
• Explored a case study of one writer’s search for a tune;
• Shared their homework in small groups: their proposed hymn theme;
• Decided on a familiar tune to support their text;
• Engaged in small-group critique of everyone’s proposed text/tune pairing;
• Taken home the second assignment: to respond to a brief e-mailed questionnaire, and to write up to three verses of their hymn.
Session Three  - Technical Issues; Language

At the end of this session participants will have
• Sung one verse of each writer’s hymn;
• Discovered and named rhyming irregularities found in a set of given hymns;
• Made a list of other perceived weaknesses of writing technique, and shared these via sticky notes on the wall;
• Compared a set of given hymns with reference to language about people;
• Named contemporary social issues that hymn writers should be addressing;
• Compared a set of given hymns with reference to language about God;
• Identified hymns that speak in fresh ways about people, God, or contemporary concerns;
• Shared personal reactions to (a list of) 99 names for God.
• Taken home the third assignment: To finish writing and critiquing their own hymn with regard to technical issues and language; to e-mail it to the workshop leader for duplication. If participants have questions or want help with any aspects of their writing, they should feel free to contact the leader by phone or e-mail.

Session Four  - Conclusion

At the end of this session participants will have
• Joined in singing every participant’s hymn;
• Offered feedback to each writer for their consideration;
• Brainstormed ideas for a framework to feature the hymns publicly;
• Charted all ideas and voted on one of them;
• Agreed on a date and location for the proposed hymn-singing event;
• Engaged in a recorded group evaluation exercise (optional);
• Taken home an extensive written questionnaire, for return in one month;
• Taken home the assignment to prepare a brief bio sketch and an introduction to their hymn.

Session Five  - Celebrating the Hymns (optional)

At the end of this session participants will have
• Offered prepared commentary on their hymn as part of a service or hymn-singing event.
• Assisted in serving refreshments at a post-event reception (unless offered by other hosts.)
Learning Tasks

Session One: Introduction and Hymn Themes

Task #1 – Introduction

1. Sing the hymn “Surprise Us by the Words We Sing” from the Appendix. As we sing, notice any words that reflect one or more of your hopes for the workshop. (e.g. “challenge”). At the conclusion, circle these words; you may want to refer to them in the next activity.

2. Listen to the leader’s welcome and self-introduction.

3. In turns, introduce yourself to the group, sharing what it was that drew you to this workshop, and one major hope you have for it. (The leader will record your answers.)

4. Tell one brief story of how a hymn shaped your faith or influenced your life

Task #2 – Agenda Review

1. On your handout, follow the leader’s reading aloud of the agenda for each session of the workshop. Mark any on which you want more information. What are your questions?

Task #3 – Learning Covenant

1. For efficient use of our time together, and to help us feel comfortable with each other and free to ask questions and share personal stories, a learning covenant has been drawn up for our mutual benefit. In your table group, elect a scribe/reporter for the duration of the workshop. Review the learning covenant. Are there any changes you wish to make, or items you wish to add? Write each suggestion on a sticky note. We will hear from each group, and attach the notes to a wall chart. The leader will produce an amended covenant for next week.

BREAK (5 minutes)

Task #4 – Hymns: Definition and Characteristics

1. St. Augustine defined a hymn as “A song of praise to God.” There have been many attempts to describe the unique characteristics of a hymn, as distinct from a song.
In your groups, craft a concise, mutually agreeable definition of “hymn”. We will hear each table’s definition.

2. Individually, in three minutes, list all the purposes you can think of for the singing of hymns. Going around the room, the leader will write down one offered by each participant.

3. In your small group, take the list of select hymns you have been given and look these up in Voices United.

Check when each text was written (in its original form) and match it with its corresponding historical era on the opposite page

4. You will have just had a very abbreviated lesson in the history of Western hymnody! What similarities / differences have you noticed in the content and style of the hymns? We will take a few minutes to hear responses around the room.

Task #5 – Themes in Hymns

1. Certain themes are givens in hymnody; examples would be Love, Grace, Thanksgiving, Repentance, Praise, Peace or Joy. Some hymns are based on Scripture passages or the Psalms, others on liturgical seasons or festivals (e.g. Advent, Palm Sunday.)

Within your group, examine the Index of Topics and Categories at the back of Voices United and More Voices, hymnals whose publication dates are only 11 years apart. As you find them, call out topics both indexes have in common (2 minutes.)

2. As your scribe lists them under two headings, Voices United and More Voices, look up in which hymnal’s index the following topics are found:

Abuse
Church: triumphant
Diversity
First Nations Sunday
God: kingdom, majesty
Heaven / Paradise
Hell
Inclusiveness
Interfaith
Life transitions
Mystery
Satan / devil
Sin
Truth
Violence

In the open group, answer these questions:

- Which topic did you find common to both lists? Offer opinions why this might be so.
- Looking over the two lists, do you see a changing trend in topics?
• **Leaf through** both indexes again. What are some of the longest sections? The shortest?
• Do you see social issues or liturgical themes significantly inadequately represented in United Church hymnody, according to these indexes? **Share** these aloud with the group.

**Task #6 – Closing**

1. Ask someone to read the following paragraph, then **sing** the hymn VU 284, “Joyful is the Dark.”

   *For a long time, it has been a stereotype in Western culture to equate darkness with evil or danger, and light with goodness and safety. While one can understand the origins of such notions in primitive societies, today we have become aware of racial sensitivities around such language, and hymn writers have attempted more balanced expressions by avoiding such implications entirely, choosing different words (e.g. “obscure” in place of “black”) or by deliberately writing of positive attributes of darkness.*

2. Homework: - **respond** by e-mail to a questionnaire seeking feedback on today’s work. **Bring** to the next session the theme of the hymn you wish to write.
Session Two – Working with Meter and Tunes

Task #1 – Welcome.

1. **Join in singing** a hymn chosen by a participant volunteer, who will **offer** a few words about its meaning to him/her.

Task#2 – Indexes: Meter and Tune

1. In your table group, **explore** the indexes in *Voices United* (we have already seen the Topics listings.)
   - Which one(s) do you **think** people in the pew are most likely to turn to? Why?
   - Which one(s) do you **think** ministers, musicians and worship planners are likely to use most frequently? Why?
   - Which one(s), if any, are a mystery to you so far?

2. **Read** carefully this explanation of Tune Names and Meter:

   *All hymn tunes have an identifying name, which in Voices United is found at the bottom right corner of the page. For instance, the tune for #747 “The Lord’s My Shepherd” is called CRIMOND. While the 23rd Psalm is the text usually associated with this tune, there are a great many others you can sing to CRIMOND.*

   *Looking under the tune name, you will find a set of numbers. These are the meter of that tune, and represent the number of syllables in each line of the text that the tune can be used for. CRIMOND is an 8686 tune, which means the first line has eight syllables (try it!), the second six, the third eight again, and the last line six. Any hymn that has the same 8686 meter (there are many!) can technically be sung to the tune of “The Lord’s My Shepherd”. (“Hark the Herald Angels Sing” was originally sung to EASTER HYMN!)*

   *Note that a “D” after the meter means it is doubled; 6565D just means 6565 6565. Most hymns have four lines per stanza, but this one would have eight, in that order. “Rep” means the last line is repeated (as, for example, in “Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah”. “Irr.” or a dotted line without numbers represents a tune whose meter is irregular, without a discernible pattern. Such tunes are generally wedded to their texts and are difficult to replace with others.*

3. What questions do you have?

4. **Leaf through** the hymn book *More Voices* and **look for** tune names and meters.
   - Do all the songs in this book list a tune and meter?
   - What do you **think** may account for any omissions?
   We will **hear responses** from each group.

5. Your group will be given 5 hymn texts without metrical information. Together,
• work out the meter for each text.
• Is there one that gives you trouble? Why?
• In the Metrical Index, where would you find this meter?

We will hear responses from volunteers.

Task #3 – Matching Texts with Tunes

1. In your table group, read the following passage and follow the indicated instructions:

Look again at the Metrical Index of Tunes. Note how all the tunes in the book are arranged by meter, beginning with the shortest lines. Look up CRIMOND again in the 8686 section and you will find 26 other tunes that share this meter. One of these is AMAZING GRACE, also sometimes called NEW BRITAIN.

Try singing “The Lord’s My Shepherd” and “Amazing Grace” to each other’s tune – Does it work? You can sing any 8686 text to any 8686 tune (within limits – we’ll come to that soon.)

Question: Under what circumstances might you want to make such an exchange? We will hear a few answers from around the room.

2. Work out this group exercise:

You are in charge of leading worship for a church meeting, and decide that the words for VU 393 (“I Greet Thee, Who My Sure Redeemer Art”) are exactly right for your topic. The tune, however, called SONG 24, is unfamiliar to everyone, including you. You want to find a more familiar tune to which to sing this hymn.

• Decide on the meter of the text: where is that quickly found?
• What is the next step in finding a matching tune?
• When you have found a tune you like that works, write it on the board/easel.
• Did any group try matching this text to SLANE (“Be Thou My Vision”)? What happened?
• Let’s all try singing hymn 393 to SLANE. We will listen to suggestions why it does not work, despite its matching meter.

3. You have discovered that, in addition to meter, we must take into account the pattern of accents or stressed syllables in the text.

• As a class, watch as one person at the board draws a line under each accented syllable of this sentence: You can do it if you try it.
• Now ask another volunteer to do the same here: I think I can; in fact, I’m sure.
• If these were the first lines of two hymns, could their tunes be interchanged?
• Finish this sentence: When matching texts and meters, one must also take care to match the pattern of their……………
• Compare your answer with another person.

Task #4 – Tune Appropriateness
1. **Choose** volunteers to **act out** the following situation. A pianist would be preferable as the “organist”. Everyone in the room has a copy of *Voices United* open to follow.

*Your worship planning team is looking for a powerful Palm Sunday hymn, and the minister proposes VU 127, “Ride On, Ride On in Majesty.”*

**Minister:** These are great words; they follow the sequence of the Passion narrative all the way from Palm Sunday’s pomp and festivity to the agony of the crucifixion, even foreshadowing Easter. Good stuff!

**Organist:** Trouble is, no one knows this tune, *THE KING’S MAJESTY*, which is a shame because it’s Canadian and has all the power you’re looking for. *(Plays a verse.)

Every time we’ve tried it, people have complained.

**Minister:** I don’t see the problem – former organists have always used *WINCHESTER NEW*, which is a matching tune that everyone knows.

**Organist:** Well, yes. But just listen to it: *(plays a verse of VU 20).* That sounds rather cheerful to me! It could work for the first verse, Jesus’ triumphal entry, the Hosannas and all that – but what about the rest of the hymn, with its somber talk of death and sacrifice and pain? *(Turns to the class)* Shall we sing verse 3 to *WINCHESTER NEW* and see how well it illustrates the text? *(All sing)*

**Minister:** I take your point – no one ever challenged that tune before. But I really want this text; what do you suggest we do?

**Organist:** I thought this problem might arise today, so I looked up other metrically matching tunes, only none are that much better at capturing the drama and the mixture of moods of Palm Sunday. But yes, I did come up with a suggestion! Thinking outside the box, I looked up 8888D tunes – and there it was: *JERUSALEM*!

It means each repeat of the tune uses up two of the verses, but since there is an even number of verses it works out fine. Best of all, I hope you agree that the mood is now exactly right! *(To class)* Shall we try and see? *(Class sings all of “Ride On” to JERUSALEM.)*

2. **Return your attention** to the board/easel, with every group’s suggested fitting tune for the hymn VU 363. Taking turns, **sing** the first verse, from your hymn book, to each of the suggested tunes.

Going around the room, we will hear everyone’s **vote** for the match they consider most successful, and briefly, why you think so. A **check** will be placed beside a tune each time it is chosen. Is there a clear “winner”, or is there an even distribution?
3. What factors are involved in making one tune more appropriate than another? At random, 
call out your ideas; the leader will list them on the board/easel.

BREAK (5 minutes)

Task #5 – Choosing Your Tune

1. A case study: One hymn writer’s tune decision.
I needed a hymn on the topic of Persistence in Prayer and decided to write one, joining together 
four scripture passages:

   Jacob’s wrestling with the angel (Genesis 32:22-29)
   Childless Hannah’s pleas answered (1 Samuel 1:1-28; 2:1-10)
   The persistent widow (Luke 18: 1-8)
   God knocking on our hearts’ door (Rev. 3:20)

Now I needed an appropriate tune, one that would underscore the idea of repeated pleading, 
knocking, contending with a stubborn adversary.
It took many hours of leafing through hymnals and thinking of familiar tunes before I found BRYN 
CALFARIA and was elated at how well the insistent internal repeats picked up my theme. Writing 
my text with this tune running through my head was the easy part after that!

Ask four class members to read the stanzas of the hymn “Jacob, Wrestling with the Angel” 
(Appendix.)
Now listen while BRYN CALFARIA (found at VU 812) is played. Sing two verses to “la”.

- How many sequences of repeated musical phrases do you hear in the tune?
- Write out the meter of the text. Would you expect to find many tunes to match the words 
  if they had been written first? (Hint: For beginning hymn poets, it is best to choose a 
suitable tune first, and then write the text to it. The reverse process would not necessarily 
find you a ready-made tune!)

Task #6 – Considering Your Tune

1. In your table group, share the theme or subject of the hymn you want to write.
Working with ONE partner, make a list of 3 possible tunes for each potential hymn text, 
considering the various features you have identified earlier, such as style and mood.
Critique all ideas in a helpful manner.

Task #7 – Closing

1. We will all sing one volunteer’s choice of hymn from Voices United or More Voices, 
after hearing their brief explanation for the selection.
As we sing, consider whether you think the tune is a good match for the words.
2. Take home two assignments: to **respond** at home to a brief e-mailed feedback questionnaire; to **write** one or more verses of your proposed hymn, to the tune you have decided on.

**E-mail** a copy of your work to your workshop leader before the next session.
Session Three – Technical Issues: Language

Task #1 – Welcome and Check-in

1. All **sing** MV 27, “Creator God, You Gave Us Life” by Judith Snowdon (2004.) As you sing, **give silent thanks** for your own gifts of creativity.

2. From the prepared handouts, **sing** one verse of each person’s hymn to their chosen tune; **listen** to everyone’s 1-minute explanation of their topic and tune choice.

Task #2 – Rhyming

1. **Look** again at MV 27. What would you **say** is the rhyming scheme (e.g. abac, etc.)? If you are having difficulty determining this, **why** is that?

2. In your table group, **name and make a list** of rhyming irregularities you find in the following hymns in More Voices: 27, 44, and VU 284. Do such departures from true rhyme bother you? **Why or why not?**

3. Besides **false rhyme** (love-move), other rhyming problems beginning writers need to be aware of include **cliché** (love-dove), **repetition** (using the same sounds repeatedly or too often, unless this is done deliberately), and **forced rhyme** (grief-peace). Take 2 minutes now and **examine** your own hymn text for rhyming problems like these; **mark** them for later working on.

4. Do all hymns necessarily have rhyme as a feature? Look at MV 62, 64, 125; and VU 354, 324, 448. You might run across many others: Can your group **think** of reasons why some hymns do not use rhyme in their poetry? We will **hear** from each group.

Task #3 – Other Writing Traps

In your group, **read** the following one by one, pausing to make sure everyone understands:

1. Besides rhyme, other weak spots in contemporary hymn poetry can include:
   - Grammatical errors or contrived syntax (“Jerusalem, within thy gates our feet shall standing be”);
   - Faulty punctuation (“Take my life and let it be, consecrated Lord to thee”);
   - Archaic language (thou dost; “here I raise my Ebenezer”, …);
   - Overworked imagery (God the Father, vale of tears . . .);
   - Colloquialisms or contractions (“who isn’t cool?” Exceptions: spirituals and ethnic songs, which use folk language);
   - Lack of logical or sequential movement from first to last verse;
   - Inaccurate Scripture references
What other writing traps can your group think of? Write each one on a sticky note and add it to the flip chart page titled “Hymn Writing Traps”, reading it out to the class as you do so.

BREAK ( 5 minutes )

Task # 4 – People Language

1. Because of sensitivity around inclusive language, in secular and religious circles, editors of recent hymnals have been careful to monitor a balancing of gendered references, resorting to textual editing whenever necessary and possible.

Using Voices United, look up these traditional hymns and determine how the texts accommodate inclusivity or hospitality; share your thoughts with the whole group.

- 580 Faith of Our Fathers
- 590 A Prophet Woman Broke a Jar
- 594 O Christian, Love Your Sister and Your Brother (what was it earlier?)
- 595 We Are Pilgrims
- 597 Simon, Simon (clue: check the authorship!)
- 634 To Abraham and Sarah

Heated objections were raised by some at the deliberate omission of the hymn “Onward, Christian Soldiers, Marching as to War.” What considerations do you think might have led to this editorial decision?

Objections to the changing of words in familiar texts have included:

- “It’s not right to tamper with a poet’s original work.”
- “It was good enough once – why do we need to change it?”
- “I know perfectly well that ‘man’ refers to both men and women.”

Share any other objections to changes in familiar hymns that you may have heard.

Role play: In your group, ask volunteers each to raise one of these objections, and let others attempt to reply. Remember: passion is constructive, as long as it remains courteous.

2. Hymnals more recent than Voices United have begun to address other human justice concerns besides male-dominant language. We touched on these in Session One. As a group, list as many as you can think of (e.g. ageism); when you have finished, make an all-class list on the board or flip chart.

Task #5 – God Language

1. Just as with people language, language around the name and attributes of the Triune God have greatly expanded in recent hymnals.
We will divide the class into 3 sections; each will work on one member of the Trinity, traditionally known as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

As a section, look through your two hymnals and write as many different names or images for your “person” (“God in three persons”)... as you find used, each on a sticky note. (Hint: you might start with the section ‘Nature of God’)

2. On the board or easel, under those 3 headings, stick your notes as they are created.
   - Which member of the Godhead has the most different names or images?
   - Have any of these names surprised/dismayed/delighted or otherwise influenced your thinking about God? When all the names are up, take turns sharing your reactions if you wish.

3. Individually, on the handout “99 Names for God”, underline all you are familiar with or have heard used; cross out any that you find personally problematic; circle the 10 that resonate most clearly with your own concept of God. Add any others that occur to you. In pairs, compare your lists. What do the results suggest to you? Share any insights with the whole class as you reassemble.

Task #6 – Closing

1. We will read slowly together, as a prayer, hymn MV 49, “When We Seek Language.” As you read, be attentive to the many ways the author names the Holy One. Before we do this, be prepared to suggest why we are not singing the hymn. Using what you know of tune exchanging, is that a possibility?

2. At home, finish writing your hymn text, then fine-tune it, keeping in mind today’s work on technical issues and language. When you are satisfied with your hymn, e-mail it to your workshop leader for duplication.

Session Four – Conclusion

Task #1 – Singing our Hymns!

1. Sitting comfortably in a circle around the piano, we will sing (with the writers’ permissions) each hymn that has been sent in the past week to the leader.

2. Offer comments or questions – and bravos! – to each writer as you feel moved.

Task #2 – Planning to Share our Hymns

1. In table groups, brainstorm ideas for a public sharing of the hymns we have written. Be open to some writers feeling uncomfortable with the concept; you may need to debate its practicality, or even its desirability in the first place and be prepared to forego it.
2. Get together as a plenary again and **share** your ideas, group by group. The leader will **chart** them all.

3. After an open discussion and question period on the pros and cons of these ideas, **vote** on which plan, if any, to actualize.

**BREAK (10 minutes)**

**Task #3 – Evaluation**

1. All participants will be invited to **engage in** an oral group evaluation, facilitated by the workshop leader and recorded for follow-up learning and training purposes. Feedback will be welcome as help in planning future workshops.

2. **Take home** an extensive written questionnaire, to be returned within one month.

**Task #4 - Closing**

1. **Sing** again the hymn “Surprise Us by the Words We Sing” (from Session 1.)

2. **Join in** a responsive **prayer** (Appendix).

3. At home, **prepare** a brief (250 words) *introduction* to your hymn for the hymn singing celebration (if there is to be one) as well as a brief (3-5 sentences) *biographical sketch*. E-mail these to your leader for preparation of a program.
Session Five – Celebrating the Hymns! (optional)

Task #1 –

1. Assist in the hymn festival, depending on its location and style as decided in Session 4. Offer the spoken introduction to your hymn before it is sung.

2. Unless another group has offered to host, assist in serving refreshments at a post-event reception.

Congratulations – you are a HYMN WRITER!
Materials Needed

Session One
- Piano or keyboard
- Wall board or easel/flipchart on stand, markers
- Sticky notes
- Pencils, writing paper
- Handout: Hymn “Surprise Us by the Words We Sing” (Appendix)
- Handout: List of workshop goals (Appendix)
- Learning Contract written on large Bristol board
- Identical sets of hymns from different historical eras for each participant (Appendix)
- Copies of hymnals Voices United and More Voices for everyone

Session Two
- Piano or keyboard
- Revised Learning Contract, on large Bristol board, posted prominently.
- Wall board or easel, markers
- Pencils, paper
- Hymnals Voices United and More Voices
- Identical set of 5 hymn texts per group (Appendix)
- Copies of hymn “Jacob, Wrestling with the Angel” (Appendix)

Session Three
- Piano or keyboard
- Wall board or easel, markers
- Pencils, paper
- Sticky notes
- Hymnals Voices United and More Voices
- Handout: One verse of everyone’s hymn text
- Handout: “99 Names for God” (Appendix)

Session Four
- Piano or keyboard
- Wall board or easel, markers
- Pencils, paper
- Set of duplicated participants’ hymns, one per person
- Audio-taping equipment
- Leader’s set of questions for the recording session
- Copies of the take-home feedback questionnaire
- Hymn “Surprise Us by the Words We Sing” (Appendix; Session 1)
- A responsive prayer (Appendix)
- Small bell, singing bowl, or hand chime
Session Five (depending on location)

- Piano, organ or keyboard to lead singing
- Microphone if necessary
- Booklets of the workshop participants’ hymns, with brief bios
- Each participant’s personal commentary on their hymn (brought individually)
- Refreshments for the reception, as planned earlier
Appendix - contents

1. Hymn “Surprise Us by the Words We Sing”; text by Brian Wren.
2. Learning Covenant
3. Set of hymns in historical context
4. Set of 5 hymn texts for metrical exercise
5. Hymn “Jacob, Wrestling with the Angel”
6. “99 Names for God” - Telfer
7. Responsive Prayer
Surprise Us by the Words We Sing
(Words: Brian Wren, 1998. Tune: Repton, VU 504)

Surprise us by the words we sing,
   dear Christ, and as we praise
break through each warm, familiar shell
and use the songs we know so well
   to challenge and amaze.

Surprise us by new friends, baptized
   as partners in your grace.
Through them we meet, by your own choice,
enlivening echoes of your voice
   and glimpses of your face.

Through different aims and clashing views
   reveal and have us know
ideas and people we ignore
until you nudge us to explore,
   discover, change and grow.

Fulfilled and cherished by your love
   we’ll trace your wider ways;
beyond our safe and local view
we’ll dare to go, expecting you
   to challenge and amaze.

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Learning Covenant (Holy Manners)

In this workshop, we will

- Respect each other’s different points of view and theological stance
- Listen attentively to each other without interruption
- Encourage the quiet people to speak
- Practice discretion by keeping personal stories confidential within the room unless given permission for wider sharing
- Be positive and supportive in our comments and critiques
- Respect given time lines; be punctual in attendance
- Remain focused on specific tasks and participate as fully as possible
A Panorama of Western Christian Hymnody

8   Lo, How a Rose
31  O Lord, How Shall I Meet You
34  Come Now, O God of Peace
35  Good Christian Friends, Rejoice
43  Go, Tell it on the Mountain
54  Unto Us a Boy is Born
61  Of the Father’s Love Begotten
149 When I Survey the Wondrous Cross
200 O Holy Spirit
229 God of the Sparrow
262 A Mighty Fortress
307 Touch the Earth Lightly
320 Mothering God, You Gave Me Birth
333 Love Divine, All Loves Excelling
337 Blessed Assurance
352 I Danced in the Morning
379 O Holy Spirit, Root of Life
391 God, Reveal Your presence
393 I Greet Thee, Who My Sure Redeemer Art
413 O Splendour of God’s Glory Bright
431 Asithi Amen
509 I, the Lord of Sea and Sky
676 God, Make Us Servants of Your Peace
696 Homeless People, Will You Listen
702 When a Poor One Who Has Nothing
<table>
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<tr>
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<td>Polyphonic (4-part harmony) Motets</td>
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<td>Mid-20th C. “Hymn Explosion”</td>
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<td>Global Hymnody</td>
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<td>Late 20th – 21st C. (justice issues)</td>
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</table>
Work Out the Meter of These Hymn Texts

1. As we walked home at close of day
   a stranger joined us on our way.
   He heard us speak of one who’d gone,
   and when we stopped, he carried on.

2. Dear Mother God, your wings are warm around us,
   we are enfolded in your love and care;
   safe in the dark, your heartbeat’s pulse surrounds us,
   you call to us, for you are always there.

3. Tell me the stories of Jesus I love to hear,
   things I would ask him to tell me if he were here:
   scenes by the wayside, tales of the sea,
   stories of Jesus, tell them to me.

4. Still, still, still:
   the night is calm and still.
   the Christchild in his crib lies sleeping,
   angels round him watch are keeping.
   Still, still, still;
   the night is calm and still.

5. O Canada! Our home and native land.
   True patriot love in all of us command.
   With glowing hearts we see thee rise,
   The true North strong and free;
   From far and wide, O Canada,
   We stand on guard for thee.
   God keep our land glorious and free;
   O Canada, we stand on guard for thee;
   O Canada, we stand on guard for thee!
Jacob, Wrestling with the Angel

Text:
Lydia Pedersen
2004/2014

Tune: BRYN CALFARIA 87874477

Jacob, wrestling with the angel, through the long night knew no rest
After years of futile pleading, childless Hannah's son was born.
When we storm the gates of heaven, faith and trust will find your ear.

But prevailed at break of morning; saw his faithful vigil blessed.
To the temple she brought Samuel; made him God's, as she had sworn.
Wearied him with her persistence till he listened to her plight.

Holy God, in life's hard trials, when we struggle,
Faithful God, you hear our weeping; raise us up from despair.
Patient God, continue knocking, till our proud hearts question, doubt, with you contend.

Hopeless need and hopeless pain, So to sing your praise again.
Covenant mercy, claim;
Wearily cries their need to win.

Keep us constant to the end.
And, relenting, ask you in.
99 Names for God

Maker of Heaven and Earth  
Merciful Judge  
Most Holy

Magnificent Co-Ordinator  
Mystery beyond All Understanding

Miracle Maker

Mighty Trumpet  
Multitudes  
Many

Host  
Legion  
Skillful Designer  
Star Maker

Laughing Skies  
Delight of Our Hearts  
Gentle Clown

Most Beautiful Thought  
Ancient Rock of Our Salvation  
Mischief Maker

Singer of All Delight  
Sun Dance  
Original Artist  
Cleansing Rain

Blessing  
Secret  
Wonderful Adventure  
Mountain Mover

Amazing Mindreader  
Playful Rascal  
Morning  
Evening

The Hope of All  
Animator  
The Word  
Beckoning Finger

Ageless Parent  
Fire  
Water  
Earth  
Sky

Strength  
Searcher  
Patient Guide  
Companion

Understanding Listener

Lament  
Deepest Sorrow  
Kind Face  
Provider

Purest Water  
Simple Melody  
The Innocent  
Wonderful Gift

Long Searched For Desire  
Lamp for Our Feet

Protector of the Weak  
Bold Sculptor  
Prolific Creator

Centre of Knowledge  
The Beginning and the End

Alpha and Omega  
Creator of Night and Day  
Giver of All Things

Great Energy  
Breath of Life  
Redeemer

Love beyond All Imagination
Friend of the Outcast  
Source of Strength  
The Origin of All  

Birth  
Death  
Unending Compassion  
Light of the World  

Ultimate Reality  
The Awakening  
The Centre of All Being  

The Everlasting Truth  
Cosmos  
Dreamer  
Promise  

Ceaseless Joy  
Comforter  
Sustainer  
Quiet One Who Waits  

The Well  
Shelter  
Gracious Giver  
Tender Lover  

Open Arms  
Healing Physician  
Serenity  

Tranquility  
Wisdom  
Peace  

Vigilant Watcher  
Silent One  
Breath of the Universe  

The Unknown
Responsive Prayer

Holy God, Composer of the Universe,
    The day draws to a close and we are weary.
This workshop stretched us in many different directions.

Writing our songs did not come as easily as we would have liked;
    there are technical issues that caused us trouble,
    awkward passages that can still use revision,
words and images that challenged notions we long held dear.

But we have done our best,
    and we have felt your loving presence hovering over our efforts.

So we say thanks, aloud or in our hearts’ silence,
    • For those who have befriended, encouraged, inspired or prodded us…
(prayer continues after a signal, such as a bell or singing bowl, is given)

    • For new insights that nudged us down roads less traveled…
    • For moments of unexpected grace…
    • For the joy of learning and tasks achieved…
    • For the warmth of our fellowship and the unity of our purpose…

Bless the good that was done this day
    and sing us to rest
    that we may sleep in peace
    and rise again to praise you.

Amen.
Appendix G: The participants’ hymns

Where possible, I have included both the first draft of every participant’s hymn, and the final version. In some cases more than one preliminary draft is given, to allow the reader to see the progression of ideas and technical mastery.

Punctuation is reproduced exactly.
**William’s hymn**

a) The more I grab these worldly things,
The more they grab at me
Let go desires and human strife
And faith will set you free

Oh troubled world, we strive and run
Your trappings hold me tight
Broken now, we see no end
Let go and faith will mend

Lit ages ago, on a desert hill
To this day the fire burns
Our worldly wants, no amount can sate
Let go, pass through his narrow gate

Awaken now in a sleeping land
Feel within, the gathering fire
I empty out this clotted space
Make room for my Saviour’s grace

b) Oh, how I yearn for worldly gain!
My paltry wants and mortal greed
Possess my faint and captive heart.
Hold fast and faith will set me free

Oh truth-less world, we strive and run
Your trappings grow, I see no end
False Gods abound with lifeless life
Help me let go and faith will mend

Lit long ago on a desert hill
Forevermore, love’s fire will burn
Our profane thirst, we cannot slake
Help me let go, to faith return

Awaken, soul, from endless sleep;
Lay down your chains, turn from strife;
Feel deep within, faith’s cleansing fire
Make room for love, God’s gift of life.
Oh, How I Yearn for Worldly Gain
Tune: O WALY WALY VU 372)

Oh, how I yearn for worldly gain!
My paltry wants and mortal greed
possess my faint and captive heart.
Hold fast, and faith will set me free.

Oh luring world, we strive and run;
your trappings grow, I see no end.
False gods abound with lifeless life.
Help me let go, and faith will mend.

Lit long ago on desert hill,
forevermore Love’s fire will burn.
Our profane thirst we cannot slake.
Help me let go, to faith return.

Awaken, soul, from endless sleep;
lay down your chains and turn from strife.
Feel deep within faith’s cleansing fire
make room for Love, God’s gift of life.

Music: Trad. English melody
John’s hymn

a) O Lord, we thank thee
   Lord, we give praise to thee
   O Lord, you give us joyful lives.
   O Lord, we are bless/ed
   O Lord, we are gra/teful
   Accept these gifts given with love.

(Some cleaning up of metrical counts, and a discussion of archaic “thee” language, produced the following revision, to the tune CRUSADERS’ HYMN.)

b) O Lord, we thank you;
   Lord, we give praise to you.
   O Lord, you give us joyful lives.
   Lord, we are blessed,
   Lord, we are grateful.
   Accept these gifts we give with love.

(Now interested in writing a more substantial text, John began over and, with help from family members, wrote what became “Summer is Our Time for Progress” (see next page.)
Summer is Our Time for Progress

Summer is our time for progress,
Growth and happiness abound
God will lead us ever forward
As we seek a higher ground

Autumn is our time for harvest,
Fruitful gifts for all to share
Things that we have all accomplished
Come together with Your care

Winter dawns with frozen stillness
Gives us all a frozen view
Days get longer ever longer
As we build our church with you

Springtime is the glorious season
When all things start to renew
It is time for celebration
Thank you, Lord, for all you do.
d) **Summer is Our Time for Progress**

(Tune: SPIRIT DANCING  VU 388)

Summer is our time for progress;
growth and happiness abound.
God will lead us ever forward
as we seek a higher ground.

Autumn is our time for harvest;
fruitful gifts for all to share.
Things that we have all accomplished
come together with your care.

Winter is our time for stillness,
yet despite our frozen view
days get longer, ever longer
as we build our Church with you.

Springtime is the glorious season
when all things start to renew.
It is time for celebration:
Thank you, Lord, for all you do!


Note:  The author suggests shifting the order of the verses to end with the current season.
Susan’s hymn

a) As we witness your baptism 8
   And we celebrate in song  7
   It is God’s love and our pledges  8
   That show you that you belong.  7

   Water tracings on your forehead  8
   in the name of Trinity   7
   Are a promise of God’s great love  8
   Just for you eternally.   7

   Caring blankets now presented,  8
   And the candles brightly burn.   7
   With these symbols we support you  8
   As you grow in faith and learn.   7

   Promises and pledges offered  8
   By your parents and us all,   7
   “We will raise you as a Christian.  8
   We have listened to God’s call.”  7

   With these blessings softly uttered  8
   And God’s kiss of peace and grace,   7
   Your first step has now been taken.  8
   Come and join our village of faith.  7(*8)

   We have witnessed your baptism.  8
   Now we sing this joyful song.   7
   You are welcome and accepted.  8
   You belong, yes, you belong!   7

Possible tune: GALILEE
As We Witness Your Baptism

(Tune: RUSTINGTON VU 535)

As we witness your baptism
and we celebrate in song,
it is God’s love and our pledges
that show you that you belong.
Water tracings on your forehead
in the name of Trinity
are a promise of God’s great love
just for you, eternally.

Caring blankets are presented
and the candles brightly burn;
with these symbols we support you
as you grow in faith and learn.
Promises and pledges offered
by your parents and us all:
“We will raise you as a Christian.
We have listened to God’s call.”

With these blessings softly uttered
and God’s kiss of peace and grace
your first step has now been taken;
come and join us in our faith.
We have witnessed your baptism;
now we sing this joyful song:
“You are welcome and accepted.
You belong; yes, you belong!”

Music: C. Hubert H. Parry (1897)
Kenneth’s hymn  (only version)

His Bright Eyes Were Like His Mother’s  (A Father’s Prayer)
(Tune: PICARDY   VU 111)

His bright eyes were like his mother’s,
life was in his dance and song;
but all I could feel was sorrow;
I was wrong, and now he’s gone.
   Father, listen, hear my plea:
   Please restore my son to me.

Why was he not like his brother,
steadfast, true, and so like me?
But we argued with each other,
split his share and set him free.
   Father, listen, hear my plea:
   Please restore my son to me.

Worldly country, cruel, hard-hearted,
it would steal his soul away.
Give him strength now to depart it,
longing, praying for that day.
   Father, listen, hear my plea:
   Please restore my son to me.

Spying dust on the horizon –
Servant, fetch the fatted calf!
He who died is with the living;
now we dine and now we laugh.
   Both my sons are in my care;
   God has listened to my prayer.

Music: Trad. French melody, ca. 17th C.
Isobel’s hymn

Refinding the Light

Sung to KINGSFOLD 8686D

The dark surrounds me, deep and cold,
It smothers out the heat.
Sweet, smiling faces, sunny streets
Turn fast to ice and sleet.
Hope feels so far away right now,
It’s well beyond my grasp.
I reach so far to try to heal
But light goes swiftly past.

A close embrace, a touching hand
Bring moments of relief,
But fast the dark comes tumbling back
To scare me from my sleep.
The birds sing softly to awake
Me from my darkened mind.
I take a step toward the light,
Its mood so bright and kind.

The glowing sun comes through the glass
To dance across my hand.
I turn to face the feel of hope:
Blue waves and pearl white sand.
I call a friend, I plant a bulb,
I sweep my porch of pain,
I feel so free and strong and brave.
The light fills me again.
b)

**The Dark Surrounds Me**  
(Tune: KINGSFOLD VU 625)

The dark surrounds me, deep and cold,  
it smothers out the heat.  
Sweet, smiling faces, sunny streets  
turn fast to ice and sleet.  
Hope feels so far away right now,  
it’s well beyond my grasp.  
I reach and reach to try to heal  
but light moves swiftly past.

A close embrace, a touching hand  
bring moments of relief.  
Though still the dark comes tumbling back  
to scare me from my sleep,  
the birds sing softly to awake  
me from my troubled mind.  
I take a step toward the light,  
inviting, bright and kind.

The glowing sun shines through the glass  
to dance across my hand.  
I turn to face the signs of hope:  
blue waves and pearl-white sand.  
I call a friend, I plant a bulb,  
I sweep my porch of pain,  
and now renewed, more strong and brave,  
the light fills me again.

Music: Trad. Melody, arr. Ralph Vaughan Williams
**Joan’s hymn**  (only version, submitted as below)

**Hymn: Morning Has Broken**

Speak to me softly  
Fill me with courage  
Give me the strength to  
Follow your path  

Stand by me always  
Shelter me from pain  
Open my heart to  
Love and be loved  

While I was once lost  
Now I am ready  
I can stand still now  
Knowing you’re there  

Fill me with your light  
Fill me with your grace  
In you I trust that  
All will be well  

Here I am o Lord  
Open to your call  
Breathe on me new life  
Love me once more  

Through you I am saved  
With you I rise up  
Come join me in life  
I shall be yours
**Alex’s hymn**

“Here it is – probably draft 5 but we will call it a beginning.”

In the deepest dark black hole
In these troubled times of ours
When the world no more exists
God is then, God is now, God is.

In the frightened children’s eyes
In the newborn baby’s cry
In the laughing sounds of joy
God is you, God is me, God is.

On the soaring wings of birds
In the stag upon the hill
With the lion and his prey
God is here, God is there, God is.

Where the waves lap on the shore
When the sun lights up the sky
At the very edge of space
God is here, God is there, God is.

Tune:  CGECGED
      EFDCBAG
      EDGAFED
      CBFDBDGE
In the fartherest galaxy
Past these troubled times of ours
When the earth no more exists
God is then, God is now, God is.

In the frightened children’s eyes
In the newborn baby’s cry
As we let each other go
God is you, God is me, God is.

On the wings of soaring birds
Turtles running to the sea
Ceding now the cougar’s prey
God is here, God is there, God is.

Where the waves wash on the shore
When the sun lights up the sky
At the very edge of time
God is here, God is there, God is.

Tune:

CDEC/GED(held) C Aminor
EFDC/BAG(held) C Dminor, G7,
CGEG/AFD(held) C/Dminor
CGE(held) /AFD(held)C(held) C/Dminor/C
Final version:

In the farthest galaxy
Past these trouble times of ours
When the earth no more exists
God is then, God is now, God is.

On the wings of soaring birds
Turtles struggling to the sea
With the monarch butterflies
God is here, God is there, God is.

In the newborn baby’s cry
In all frightened children’s eyes
As we hold each other tight
God is you, God is me, God is.

When we find the things we share
When the sun lights up the sky
At the very edge of time
God is here, God is there, God is.
Wilderness Rejoice

Easter

Isaiah 35, Exodus 14, John 20
Luke 2 and Matthew 21 (verses 2 & 3) to come

Wil-der-ness re-joice! Blossom in the sun! Floods re-veal the path. Go for-ward now in

hold our nak-ed bones? Til he stretched his wea-thered hand. In- vi-ta-tion or con-
mand? And the fire it shared the dark and lit the night. ta-bles turn still our
hearts still yearn. Ooh Ooh
Sloan’s hymn

Joy in the Sunrise

(Tune: OLDHAM VU 624)

Joy in the sunrise and hope for the day;
Warmth on my face melts the shadows away.
Joy all around us as we sing God’s praise;
Joyful our voice as our spirits we raise.

Joy in the soft rain that brushes my face;
Nurtures my faith with the help of God’s grace.
Joy all around us as we sing God’s praise;
Joyful our voice as our spirits we raise.

(Stanza 3 was added later at my suggestion that an image of wind would round out the sun and water images)

Joy in the breezes that whisper a song;
Fills up our souls with God’s presence so strong.
Joy all around us as we sing God’s praise;
Joyful our voice as our spirits we raise.

Music: Ron Klusmeier (1974)
**Joy’s hymn**

a) **Mystery**

(Tune: EVENTIDE VU 436)

God of the question, holy is the dark
You are the why, you lift us in our doubt
When answers fail, your promise holds us fast:
Desert and storm, my child, I am with you.

b) God of the question, when we cannot see
Light for tomorrow, nothing seems to be
Sure to hold onto; we can’t see a spark –
God, you walk with us. Holy is the dark.

God of the mystery, when all answers fail,
Great dialectic, through the mighty gale
As desert storms obscure our sand-dimmed view,
We hear you whisper, “Child, I am with you.”

God of the Presence, lift us in our why,
Help us to know your mercy. Hear our cry.
We are but dust, and you are God above.
Draw near to us so we can feel your love.
God of the Question

(Tune: EVENTIDE VU 436)

God of the Question, when we cannot see
light for tomorrow, nothing seems to be
sure to hold onto; we can’t see a spark –
God, you walk with me. Holy is the dark.

God of the Myst’ry, when all answers fail,
Great Dialectic, through the mighty gale,
as desert storms obscure our sand-dimmed view,
we hear you whisper “Child, I am with you.”

God of the Presence, lift us in our Why;
help us to know your mercy; hear our cry.
We are but dust, and you are God, our All.
Draw near to us so we can hear your call.

Music: William Henry Monk (1861)
Appendix H: Interview Guide for Audio-recorded Feedback Session

(These questions are to be considered conversation starters. Responses from the group may lead into unexpected territory, which will be embraced and followed. A more formal written questionnaire will collect individuals’ responses.)

• Was this workshop fun for you? Were there any parts that you particularly enjoyed, or could have done without?

• If you were asked to re-design this workshop, what changes would you want to make?

• What was the hardest part about writing your hymn? The easiest?

• Let’s make a list on the flipchart of things you have learned about hymns that you did not know before. Just toss them out as they come to you and I will write them down.

• When you write your second hymn (☺), what might you do differently from your first?

• Has any of your thinking about God, your faith, church, hymns - anything in your spiritual life – changed in any way since the start of this workshop? How?

• Can you think of one long-lasting effect this workshop may have on you?
Appendix I: Feedback Questionnaire

Thank you for joining us in our hymn-writing adventure! I hope you are pleased with the hymn you wrote; I admired your hard work. Your contributions to the group learning tasks were greatly appreciated. Now I would ask you to take some time, when you are not in a hurry, to answer these questions in as much detail as you can. Your answers will be kept in confidence but they will help me to improve the workshop for another time.
I would be grateful if you would return the completed questionnaire within two weeks, in the stamped, self-addressed envelope provided.
Blessings,  Lydia

Name……………………………………………………………………

Age category (check one):  15-30…..  31-50…..  51-70…..  71+…..

Religious affiliation:  United Church of Canada……..  Other (name) ……………

I attend church  Regularly…..  Often…..  Sometimes…..  Rarely…..

I have  A musical background…..  A writing background…..  Written hymns before…..

Workshop design

I was interested in this workshop on hymn writing because…

My hope was that this workshop would…..

Were your hopes fully realized? How or why not?

What about the way the workshop was structured would you change?

What about the way the workshop was structured did you like and would keep?

An important part of the workshop design is working in small groups. What was your experience with this learning format?
What general comments or observations would you like to make about the design of the workshop?

**Hymn writing**
Has your personal definition of a hymn changed over the course of this workshop? If so, how?

What did you learn about hymns that you did not know before?

What did you find the most challenging in writing your hymn?

What is one piece of advice you would offer a friend who wants to write a hymn?

**Spirituality**
In judging a new hymn, what speaks to you more strongly, the text or the tune? (If you are not sure, take your favourite hymn and imagine it to a different tune, then to different words.)
How do you envision God?

How do you think your faith tradition envisions God?

Where do you think these images and ideas around God come from?

How have your ideas of God changed over time since you were young(er)?

Has this workshop changed your thinking about God in any way? Please elaborate.

If hymn writing came easily to you, what new topics would you want to engage with?
In your opinion, do the hymns you sing in your own faith community adequately express the theology of those who sing them? Do they adequately express your theology (the way you think about God)? Please elaborate.
In your hymn writing, did you explore new themes and language, or rely on familiar ones? Give an example if you can.

Did anything you heard or learned surprise you?

Did you discover anything new about yourself?
Appendix J: Ethics approval

PROTOCOL REFERENCE # 31422

March 26, 2015

Dr. William Kervin
EMMANUEL COLLEGE

Mrs. Lydia Pedersen
EMMANUEL COLLEGE

Dear Dr. Kervin and Mrs. Lydias Pedersen,

Re: Your research protocol entitled, “Sing a new song! Theological reflection based in hymn text writing: A workshop”

ETHICS APPROVAL

Original Approval Date: March 26, 2015
Expiry Date: March 25, 2016
Continuing Review Level: 1

We are writing to advise you that the Social Sciences, Humanities, and Education Research Ethics Board (REB) has granted approval to the above-named research protocol under the REB’s delegated review process. Your protocol has been approved for a period of one year and ongoing research under this protocol must be renewed prior to the expiry date.

Any changes to the approved protocol or consent materials must be reviewed and approved through the amendment process prior to its implementation. Any adverse or unanticipated events in the research should be reported to the Office of Research Ethics as soon as possible.

Please ensure that you submit an Annual Renewal Form or a Study Completion Report 15 to 30 days prior to the expiry date of your current ethics approval. Note that annual renewals for studies cannot be accepted more than 30 days prior to the date of expiry.

If your research is funded by a third party, please contact the assigned Research Funding Officer in Research Services to ensure that your funds are released.

Best wishes for the successful completion of your research.

Yours sincerely,

Sarah Wakefield, Ph.D.  
REB Chair

Dean Sharpe  
REB Manager

OFFICE OF RESEARCH ETHICS
McMurtry Building, 12 Queen’s Park Crescent West, 2nd Floor, Toronto, ON M5S 1S8 Canada
Tel: +1 416 946-3273  Fax: +1 416 946-5763  ethics.review@utoronto.ca  http://www.research.utoronto.ca/for-researchers/administrator/ethics/
Appendix K: Thesis Proposal

Sing a New Song! Theological Reflection Based in Hymn Text Writing: 
A Workshop

D.Min. Thesis Proposal
Submitted to the D.Min. Thesis Proposal Committee
Toronto School of Theology

January 30, 2015

By
Lydia Pedersen

Signature              ____________________________________________________
Co-Thesis Directors - Wm. Kervin, Fred Graham

Signature
College Advisor

Signature
Collaborative Learning Group Representative - Catherine Cavanagh

Signature
Ministry Base Group Representative - Alydia Smith
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Introduction

Title

Sing a New Song! Theological Reflection Based in Hymn Text Writing: A Workshop.

Ministry Context

Although I was born and raised Lutheran, a denomination with a special historical affinity for congregational song, my husband and I transferred our membership to the United Church of Canada in our twenties, attracted by its liberal, justice-oriented theology and lively hymnody. I retired in 2009 from my last position as organist and choir director in a Toronto United church that values and supports excellence in preaching and music and whose constituency is largely one of teachers, principals, and theologians. This remains my faith community as I maintain active involvement in the worship life of the Church as cross-denominational supply musician. I continue to lead music workshops and hymn sings, write articles and reviews, compose the occasional hymn, and serve on the executives of such professional committees as the Hymn Society in the United States and Canada and the Royal Canadian College of Organists. I provide music support for the national offices of the United Church, where I lead the music at weekly chapel services, meetings and conferences. In my home church I currently serve as chair of the Worship Committee.

Of my many extra-curricular professional activities, easily the most influential was serving on the Hymn and Worship Resource Committee charged with the production of a new hymnal for the United Church of Canada. The five years spent on that task was a period of unprecedented learning for me, in both the theology and the language of hymnody, and it sparked the profound love for songs of the Church that has inspired me ever since. Upon publication of Voices United
in 1996 I enjoyed leading workshops across Ontario to introduce the new resource to congregations. It was also during that time that I served as Music Editor of the United Church worship journal *Gathering* for four years. One feature of this journal was the printing of hymns submitted by individuals of many different backgrounds; reviewing these, and recalling hymn-writing workshop experiences, I came to realize that a great many congregants, even in the relatively progressive United Church, still think and therefore write in very traditional theological language and imagery, and I began to wonder whether an extended hymn writing workshop which combined instruction in technique with purposeful built-in theological reflection might address this issue. My research will therefore encompass the design, execution and subsequent analysis of such a hymn-text writing workshop.

**Problem and Purpose**

Interest in the writing of hymns has remained high and steady since the so-called “hymn explosion” in the 1960s. Not all hymns, however, are of equal theological or poetic merit. The historically-burdened, male dominant, pronoun-specific language we humans use of necessity to describe God has in the last century been increasingly critiqued in terms of justice (or rather, the lack thereof) and poets, hymn writers, worship planners and clergy have gradually become sensitized toward the need for an expanded vocabulary and more inclusive imagery for God. It is gratifying to see a conscious balancing between traditional hymns and ones that reflect new understandings taking place in hymnals published in the last four decades. The next step would seem to be encouraging congregants, too, to adopt such awareness and expand old terminologies and ways of thinking. Results would include a closer correlation between what people sing and what they actually believe (thus deepening the worship experience), and bringing congregational
song more in line with emergent social concerns of justice and inclusiveness. It is a well-established phenomenon that human beings resist change. History shows us that resistance is nowhere stronger than in religious conviction, which in Western context includes deeply cherished and emotive liturgical elements like hymns. As a result, too often worshipers still prefer to sing in language and imagery that has become limiting in a Postmodern context, e.g. God as Father or King, or “mankind” and “brotherhood” for people. If they did not, there would have been no reason except historical interest for a hymnal like *Voices United* to include two versions of certain “memory-bank” hymns, one the time-honoured traditional text and the other an edited or re-translated version; examples are #262 “A Mighty Fortress is Our God”, 222 # 655 “All My Hope on God is Founded”, or #543 “We Give Thee But Thine Own.” In my experience as a career church musician, the traditional version is far more likely to be the one chosen for singing, and in hymn writing workshops it is not uncommon to see God addressed as King, Father or Lord. One can hardly blame people, as long as hymnals include hymns like #314 “Come Now, Almighty King” or #273 “The King of Love My Shepherd Is”. The pastoral value of these and other memory-bank hymns is not in question here, nor am I advocating their purging. What is critical, in my opinion, is a significant amount of balance with hymns that model other ways of expressing terms or ideas that have become problematic on some level. For young people today, language like “but naught changeth thee” (# 264 “Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise”) is so far removed from everyday speech that it risks alienating them from the theological riches of the text, but the hymn lives on as a classic, much loved by the generation of their grandparents. Tradition perpetuates such notions as a heaven “up there” (#271 “There’s a Wideness in God’s Mercy”). Another traditional favourite, still very much sung, is #313 “God,  

Whose Almighty Word”, with its premise that without the Christian gospel’s “light”, corners of the earth are in benighted darkness. Further, the constant linking of darkness with need for salvation is a particular cultural insensitivity that modern hymn writers are learning to avoid, or to divert with such balancing hymns as #284 “Joyful is the Dark”.

While there is room for honouring our rich heritage of hymnody by keeping the time-tested best examples of each genre\(^\text{223}\), language does form and colour theology, so it is imperative that the language of the majority of our congregational utterances be current, in the interest of justice and a more inclusive mindset.\(^\text{224}\)

There is among the laity a commonly-held notion that theology is the domain of experts and not theirs to question or tamper with. My workshop intends to be a consciousness-raising exercise, challenging this misconception by empowering individuals to exercise theological reflection and examine what they claim to believe, through the agency of writing original hymn texts in an encouraging guided setting. I think this is important because of the recognized role that hymns can play in the progress and development of a theology that reflects socio-political changes, new sensitivities (including LGTBQ concerns, issues of race, aging, gender equality, disability and interfaith dialogue, to name just a few), or the embracing of Postmodern concepts of God and the global community. By naming these issues, singing of our understanding of them in the Christian context, and repeating them into familiarity we allow the liturgical act of hymn singing to both manifest our present theology and to stimulate reflection, critique, and ultimately

\(^{223}\) Christmas carols are almost in a class of their own; their uniquely strong sentimental associations with a beloved holiday make editing of the familiar words, or elimination of archaic or problematic texts from the hymnal entirely, prone to popular ire. The best one can do in most cases is to insert more recent carols into the mix for balance and hope that in time these will become accepted with a similar affection.

\(^{224}\) In fairness, Voices United, like most recently published hymnals, has made deliberate attempts to address these difficulties by including contemporary hymns whose language and imagery balance the problematic ones, and omitting hymns entirely that could not be salvaged in a reasonable fashion.
growth in the faith. The main focus of my proposed workshop will therefore be an invitation to participants to reflect, discuss, and possibly arrive at new and transformative spiritual insights in the process of creating an original hymn text.

Since, however, even the soundest theology still depends on a well-constructed framework to become a convincing hymn, the craft of writing a text needs to be the scaffold for the reflective aspect. Technique, then, is the second, parallel ingredient in my workshop. Hymn societies actively promote hymn writing by funding competitions and offering writing workshops. I have led, or participated in leading, such workshops in larger urban centres, most often in Toronto. Smaller church groups in more outlying areas have asked for workshops to be offered in their communities as well, but distance does not always make this feasible. A well-designed workshop manual would give regional leaders all the necessary material to lead such a workshop on their own.

With these objectives in mind, I would frame the problem and purpose of my study as follows:

The problem of my project is the tendency of many congregants in my United Church context to still have a fairly limited, traditional theological vocabulary and imagery, particularly in their concept of God and God’s working in the world, formed in large part by unexamined hymns in their lifelong repertoire which no longer accord with political, cultural or theological understandings in most of Western society.

The purpose of my project is a two-fold one:

• To teach interested participants the basic elements of hymn construction, stimulating awareness of both style and content and guiding them in the technical aspects of writing a hymn text to a well-matched tune;
• To offer participants an opportunity for theological reflection and discovery, and a broadening of their theological language and imagery, with particular attention to the nature of the Divine, as they engage in small-group learning assignments and discussions of their evolving hymn texts.

Basic Assumptions

On the basis of many corroborating statements I have read\textsuperscript{225}, and on personal experience, my primary assumption is that hymns, especially those we learned in our youth, have a crucial formative role in shaping our personal theologies – how we think about God, and the language and imagery we use in doing so.

On the same basis I assume a natural resistance in most people to change, a resistance which is heightened in hymns due to their emotive and deeply cherished character. In many cases, society moves more quickly than the Church in adopting such practices as inclusive language for people, or a treatment of all religious faiths as equal in validity and the search for truth. The United Church has for the most part come to recognize these as justice issues, but still sings many traditional hymns that do not reflect what liberal Western society considers progressive values.

\textsuperscript{225} In the thesis itself I will expand this list; here I will mention three to support my argument:

Brian Wren says “…the hymn poem does theological work as valid and important as the reasoned article, lecture or book.” (Praying Twice, pg. 374.)

John Ambrose: “Hymns have always had a central place in the making of Christians…It is from hymns that many receive their primary and most enduring theological education.” (Voices United, Introduction.)

Madeleine F. Marshall: “Hymns are, above all, educational…hymns are efforts at spiritual formation.” (Common Hymnsense, pg.6.)
At the same time, I assume that people of faith generally hold dear this most basic value of justice and are therefore willing to consider new and alternative ways of thinking. I will assume, from the fact of their signing up for my workshop, that participants are willing to engage in open dialogue with each other and are prepared to experience fresh insights and new revelations of God’s mystery through the process of creative expression.

Again on the basis of reading, notably the work of Jane Vella, as well as my experience as an educator, I am working with the premise that people learn best by doing. This assumption will inform the design of my workshop; in place of a lecturing method I hope to encourage dialogic learning through the use of specific hands-on learning tasks involving cognitive, affective and psycho-motor activities.

**Conceptual Framework**

**Theological Foundations**

1. **Faith formation.** A primary assumption feeding this project is that hymns are spiritually and dogmatically formative. There is a solid body of literature affirming the relationship between hymns and faith formation; I will cite and discuss these, with particular reference to the work of Barbara Bruce, James Fowler, James Gollnick, Ursula King, Madeleine Marshall, Don Saliers and Paul Westermeyer.

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226 Jane Vella, *Learning to Listen, Learning to Teach*.
227 Barbara Bruce, *7 Ways of Teaching the Bible to Adults*.
230 Ursula King, *Faith and Praxis in a Postmodern Age*. 
2. **Biblical mandate.** The exhortation to “sing to the Lord a new song!” is found repeatedly in the psalms and the Book of Revelation (14:3). However one interprets this, the implied momentum is toward freshness and contextual relevance. Two other biblical passages undergird my conviction that perfunctory hymn-singing, out of earnest habit or for physical pleasure, is against the spirit of Scripture: Jesus’ Parable of the Talents (Mt.25:14-30) which addresses responsible stewardship of God-given gifts, and Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians (14:15) in which I find support for the teaching component of music ministry: “I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also.”

3. **Language and metaphor.** I will ground my reason for wanting to influence budding hymn writers’ concept of God in two concerns: the moral value of justice, and the increasing irrelevance of traditional language and imagery to hymn singers, particularly young people and the unchurched. Citing the work of Sallie McFague²³⁴, Gail Ramshaw²³⁵, Brian Wren²³⁶ and others I will chart the evolution of theological language and imagery and the consequent need for updating, too, of the language and imagery in hymns.

4. **Justice.** United Church theology considers the appreciation of human diversity, hospitality toward all Others, interfaith dialogue and a more inclusive reading of

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²³¹ Madeleine Marshall, *Common Hymnsense.*
²³² Don Saliers, *Music and Theology.*
²³³ Paul Westermeyer, *The Church Musician.*
²³⁶ Brian Wren, *Praying Twice; and What Language Shall I Borrow?*
Scripture matters of justice. I will argue this through the lens of Postmodern thought, and citing such authors as John De Gruchy\textsuperscript{237}, Michael Hawn\textsuperscript{238}, Ursula King\textsuperscript{239} and Gail Ramshaw\textsuperscript{240}, as one of the major reasons for a more sensitive reading and writing of hymn texts.

5. Writing as spiritual practice. I will also bring into my arguments the perspectives of Leona English\textsuperscript{241}, who maintains that learning itself is a spiritual activity, and of Sarah Stockton\textsuperscript{242}, who defines writing, especially that of poetry, as a spiritual practice.

**Theoretical foundations**

1. Adult learning practices. I will discuss the history and philosophy of dialogic learning, which today is considered standard practice in adult education, with particular reference to the writings of Jane Vella\textsuperscript{243} and Patricia Cranton\textsuperscript{244}. My workshop will be based on this model of self-directed adult education.

\textsuperscript{237} John deGruchy, *Christianity, Art, and Transformation*.

\textsuperscript{238} Michael Hawn, *Gather into One: Praying and Singing Globally*.

\textsuperscript{239} Previously cited.

\textsuperscript{240} Previously cited.

\textsuperscript{241} Leona English, et al., *Addressing the Spiritual Dimensions of Adult Learning: What Educators Can Do*.

\textsuperscript{242} Sarah Stockton, *A Pen and a Path: Writing as a Spiritual Practice*.

\textsuperscript{243} Jane Vella, *Learning to Listen, Learning to Teach; and Taking Learning to Task: Creative Strategies for Teaching Adults*.

\textsuperscript{244} Patricia Cranton, *Understanding and Promoting Transformative Learning; and Working with Adult Learners*. 
2. **Elderlearning.** A study by Lois Lamdin\(^{245}\) is emphatic about the dramatic rise in seniors who are eager to continue their education, particularly in the fields of literature, theology and the arts. Her results strongly support the potential value of my proposed workshop, since the majority of my participants are expected to fall into that age category.

**Action-in-Ministry**

To address the stated two-fold purpose of my study, I have designed a hymn-writing workshop (see Appendix) based on the principles of dialogic adult learning. Four two-hour sessions, a week apart, will take place in a host church; my role will be that of leader and mentor as well as that of co-learner and observer. The various elements of the workshop experience will be carefully documented and critically reflected upon, through personal interviews, participant journaling, and questionnaires both before and at the end of the course. The hymns written during the workshop will serve as artifacts to be studied for potential transformative insights gained by each participant.

Participants will be self-selected volunteers; recruitment information via church newsletters in my geographical area will inform them about the nature of the study. A maximum of twelve people will allow for the kind of intensive interaction, small-group work and evaluation inherent in the workshop design. To keep one major variable constant, and because I as leader am most familiar with its theology and hymn resources, participants will be United Church affiliated. To lessen the risk of observer bias I will recruit people from churches other than my own. Although a good mix of ages, genders and backgrounds would produce the most interesting discussions, it

would also yield too much divergence in data, so I will restrict volunteers as much as possible to a similar cultural background and age sector.

As both an incentive and a rewarding celebration, I will find some means of having the hymns produced in the workshop sung in a public forum, ideally a worship event.

From recruitment to the final wrap-up I expect to require two months. I will conduct the study in the early months of 2015, spend until the summer to work up observations and evaluations, and write the thesis in the summer and Fall of that year. I expect to submit my thesis for examination in January of 2016.

**Methodology and Evaluation**

My methodology will revolve around a one-time workshop design, as previously described and appended. The introspective nature of the investigation and its potential for transformative results makes this a *phenomenological case study*, a form of pro-active methodology employing a multi-methods approach to gathering data.

Like the workshop design itself, my evaluation procedures will have a strong narrative component, following closely those pioneered by Jane Vella. Questionnaires, reflective journal entries, observer field notes, personal and group interviews and artifact analysis of the hymn texts written will serve as the sources for evaluating both factual learning and spiritual insights gained in the process. Analysis will include text-coding of written materials for units of meaning, searching for corroborating statements in interviews, and testing for validity through a group interview once results have been tabulated.

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246 Jane Vella, *How Do They Know They Know?*
Ethics Review

Appropriate ethics review forms are appended and will be submitted before work on the project commences.

Delimitations

Because of the comprehensiveness of the word “theology” and the potential for an excess of unfocused data, I will concentrate in this study on the participants’ understanding of the nature of the Holy, or of what most of them will call God. This will include the naming of God, the issues around gender language for God, and the involvement of God in human affairs. Even if God is not directly named, is understood in a non-orthodox manner (spirit, energy etc.) or is denied entirely, I will consider this theology – how one thinks about ultimate concerns.

It will be understood that the tune to which a hymn text is sung is a significant factor in the hymn’s popular reception and an effective transmission of the poet’s ideas. However, apart from a discussion of the importance of a suitable wedding between text and tune, and practice in finding good matches, the workshop will restrict itself to the creating of texts. Everyone can write words, but few people are trained in the special language and conventions of music notation.

While high standards of writing and content will be strongly encouraged, all efforts and beliefs will be applauded and treated with respect; no writer’s theological sophistication or writing ability will be deemed less acceptable than another’s. Nor will the workshop be an exercise in conversion to my or anyone else’s theological stance or aesthetic values. The goal will be enrichment rather than replacement, unless such replacement is voluntary and a result of the learning process.
The workshop is designed for lay learners; participation by theologically trained clergy or experienced hymn writers might negatively impact the comfort level of participants, make them more hesitant to offer their thoughts and work for scrutiny, and add another variable (amateur vs. professional) to the mix.

Limitations

With a maximum participant number of twelve for manageability, resulting data are unlikely to be representative of all United Church congregants. United Church congregations especially have a wide range of theological expression, from traditional orthodoxy to very evangelical worship. Working in an urban context, I imagine that my respondents’ responses will be more theologically sophisticated than if I were to conduct the study in, say, a small rural church. Differences in responses I do encounter may also be attributable to variances in gender, age, socio-economic status, education, theological background and others, which is again why I will try to keep my sample as homogeneous as possible.

The workshop will use as its main resources the two most recent hymnals of the United Church, *Voices United* and *More Voices*, the books participants will be most familiar with. While this narrows the range of hymns that could be examined and worked with, it is necessary due to time restraints and the physical impracticality of making many other hymnals available. For a basic, non-scholarly course of this sort, I consider these two books more than sufficient.

Because of the real risk of researcher-bias, and the possibility of responses being selectively geared toward pleasing me personally or to avoiding embarrassment by being less than frank, I will be soliciting participants from United churches other than my own. This should help to

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247 Repeated administration of the workshop, in different locales, would help to affirm or deny this hypothesis; it is outside the scope of this thesis.
maximize reliability of data. Nevertheless, there will be no way to measure to what degree responses are accurate reflections and not just superficial approximations of a person’s innermost thoughts and feelings. I will also have to be wary of any inclination on my part to read more into a response than is there in order to produce meaningful or interesting data. Discussing my findings with peer church musicians might help to eliminate such temptation.

**Contributions of the Study**

While there are excellent hymn-text writing studies and manuals on the market, to the best of my knowledge there are none available at present that deliberately integrate the technique of the art with a concurrent goal of inviting spiritual reflection. I am hoping that my workshop will prove to have practical value as a manual for groups, especially those within the United Church, seeking to gain insight into the construction and content of hymns, at the same time serving as a stimulus for personal reflection as well as dialogue with others on matters of faith and belief. Such groups might include worship and music committees, women’s groups, adult education courses, and youth confirmation classes.

There is the possibility of a problem with the use of this workshop by leaders other than those trained in dialogic method. The best replication of results will be by personnel familiar with the inherent specific techniques. Nevertheless, the material lends itself to creative adaptation for a variety of contexts and users. One element of the workshop that is crucial for the study but that may not be deemed practical or necessary outside the thesis context is the extensive evaluation. In many cases the hymns written may be deemed their own reward, and sufficient evidence of learning and spiritual growth.

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248 Two of these being James R. Sydnor’s *Hymns: A Congregational Study* and Gracia Grindal’s *Lessons in Hymn Writing*. 
While it is my working hypothesis that the exercise of writing a hymn will indeed effect some lasting transformative thinking in most of the participants, I am open to the possibility of there being no evident change. Nonetheless, I expect to find that for most, if not all, participants this course of study will result at least in a more profound and critical appreciation of the theology they sing each Sunday. Since so much of United Church worship is related to hymns, including not only the songs themselves but psalms, anthems, solos, and hymn-based organ and instrumental offerings, such appreciation can only enhance the individual worship experience – a not insignificant outcome. To learn whether this is indeed so I would need to follow up with the participants, individually or in a focus group setting, at a later date, perhaps a year or two after the workshop has taken place. Unfortunately, time constraints make it impossible to include such a follow-up exercise as part of this thesis.

If the workshop in its final form proves useful beyond United Church congregations, I will have all the more reason to be grateful.

Definitions

I will be using both the terms contemporary and Postmodern to refer to the time approximately between 1960 and the present, the era of what English-speaking church musicians have called the “hymn explosion” when new hymns appeared in huge numbers and in new poetic and musical styles. “Contemporary” will normally be used in a chronological sense, with context making clear whether I refer to the immediate present or the time since the 1960s.

“Postmodern” will refer to the same time period but in a philosophical sense, to speak of the present age in which orthodoxy, long-established certainties and reliance on reason have given way to acknowledgement of doubt, to the primacy of experience and cultural context, to God as
unknowable mystery, and to the “spiritual but not religious” phenomenon. In Postmodernism, creative novelty is valued over traditional categories, and diversity, ambiguity and complexity in all aspects of human living are celebrated.

By “traditional” I will normally mean the entire heritage of hymnody before 1960, although in practical terms this will quite often mean the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries which spawned such a wealth of hymns still loved and sung today in the United Church tradition, which is based on the musical heritage of Methodism and the social gospel movement.

“Dialogic learning” will be thoroughly explained in the thesis; in brief, it is a Postmodern philosophy of teaching adults that takes a holistic perspective: learners learn more than teachers teach them, by bringing their own experience to bear on learning tasks which are engaged through dialogue in small groups. The critical reflection involved in such interactive processes can lead to what is known as “transformative learning” – revision of specific beliefs or of one’s entire worldview. “Transformative learning theory” is based on the idea that we construct personal meaning from our experiences and validate that through discussion with others.”

249 Chad Hoggan, Soni Simpson and Heather Stuckey, eds. Creative Expression in Transformative Learning.