

A New Hymnal for French-speaking West and Central Africa

Phillip Magness

“Lutheran missions plant Lutheran churches” has been a recent rallying cry in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS). The slogan may seem tautological to those unaware of Lutheran mission history, but it is a healthy reminder to pastors and missionaries that those who are not ashamed of the Gospel should unashamedly seek to plant and sustain congregations that uphold the faith we confess. Because congregations are gathered around the proclamation of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments, this means enacting Lutheran worship. Given our confession that it is not necessary that rites and ceremonies be alike everywhere in the Church and that it “is enough” for the true unity of the Christian church that where the gospel is preached harmoniously according to a pure understanding, and the sacraments are administered in conformity with the divine Word”¹ (AC VII,1), the subject of worship has posed some challenges. Procrustean efforts to create a perfect model is not the evangelical way. The Gospel is the heart of Lutheran worship, and its implications for worship should not be ignored. Where those implications have been ignored, many promising missions have floundered.

While some may believe it sufficient to allow our teaching of the pure Gospel to lose its distinctiveness in order to fit into a broader non-denominational milieu, the testimony of Scripture and the witness of history require us to take a different course. We are to gather as the Body of Christ sharing a spiritual unity according to the outward marks of the Church — the pure ministry of the Word and the sacraments. This truth can be extended to the songs we sing together. While the subject of singing was not really in contention during the Reformation, it is one of the few instructions about worship we receive in the New Testament (Col 3:16, Eph 5:19, Heb 2:12).

The Pauline encouragement to share the faith through “psalms, hymns, and Spiritual songs” amplifies the Lord’s numerous commands to His people to sing of His praiseworthy deeds. Forty-eight times in the Scriptures, the Lord prescribes singing the Lord’s song.

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This singing is not for its own sake or the pleasure of our Lord's ears, but for the sake of taking the story of His love to heart and proclaiming it to the nations, so that "many may see and fear and put their trust in the Lord" (Ps 40:3b).

Lutheran music is nothing less than singing the Lord's song for the reasons the Lord tells us to sing. That is why getting people to sing about Jesus has been at the heart of my work the past twelve years in francophone West and Central Africa.

At their core, worshipping communities in francophone Africa are no different than those in the West. Most of the people who come to church in Africa are the baptized, returning to the font and altar to be renewed in the Spirit, as God continues His sanctifying work through the forgiveness of sins and the equipping of the saints through the Word. Visitors and seekers do come to church in Africa, drawn by the Word, just as anywhere else. But worship is not designed differently with them in mind; the Divine Service remains the Divine Service. We continue in our way of worship, knowing that visitors are on the Lord's mind and trusting God to have His way with them as we share Jesus with them. When the Divine Service enters into the culture and community as a part of the message of evangelization, liturgy and hymnody are adapted to the community's situation and the worship activity of the faithful is itself an evangelical message.

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This is particularly true in our singing when the song of the Church becomes not just a way through which the Word dwells richly in the faithful, but a radical, inviting witness that proclaims the truth of God to all who hear. So we choose settings of psalms, Spiritual songs (canticles), and Lutheran hymns that musically align with the realities of African music, equipping the saints for the work of the ministry. And we rejoice when, as the Lord's song takes root, Africans adapt them to their own styles of harmonic and rhythmic accompaniment. The sounds change, yet the eternal song remains the same.

After a dozen years of teaching and nurturing music from the francophone edition of *Lutheran Service Book, Liturgies et Cantiques Luthériens (LCL)*, the LCMS Africa team is at a point where we, in partnership with African churches, are prepared to release an African edition of *LCL—L'Édition Africaine (LCL—ÉA)*. This new edition will fit the needs of local congregations by providing a set of about sixty solid hymns that have been taught and embraced among the francophone churches and that cover the Church Year, the sacraments, justification, sanctification, marriage, vocation, and death.

Because it will be published in Africa, it will be much more affordable and easier to deliver. The notation will consist of melody plus simple chord symbols for guitarists and keyboardists. The hymnal will also have some select psalm antiphons, an order for Matins, and a single setting of the Divine Service, with options for some of the Spiritual songs (canticles). The Divine Service setting borrows from all three of the Divine Service settings in *LCL*, incorporating those parts that have proven the best matches for the African context.

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Also included will be several African tunes to which texts from *LCL* have been paired, some additional African hymns, and some hymns considered to be standards for all Christian denominations in the francophone world.

Congregations in Congo, Burundi, Côte d'Ivoire, Togo, Benin, Burkina Faso, and Guinea will be well-served by *LCL-ÉA* as they gather around a common liturgy and are enriched by a common song. At the same time, *LCL-ÉA* provides space for the local churches to continue singing local songs, since the general practice in Africa is to sing in the local language for the gathering music, offertory music, some communion music, and the closing music.

The model is the same as the early LCMS missions into anglophone North America. They expected the Americans to sing English hymns and adopted the best of continental Lutheran church music into traditional American forms, focusing on the teaching of new hymns, and at the same time preserving the great chorales that preach justification and teach the history of salvation.

In addition, because *LCL* has pastoral resources such as the special liturgies for Holy Week, collects, and the like, hymns in *LCL-ÉA* have a subscript number that corresponds to the hymn's location in *LCL*. This will allow pastors and vicars to use *LCL* like an altar book while the assembly uses *LCL-ÉA*.

The ministry of this mission is a simple one: teach the music of the Church to those who eagerly desire to join us in singing the faith the Lord has placed in our hearts.

Often in the West, we (in our luxury) develop abstract concepts and theories about worship and then use our blessed imaginations to devise all sorts of possibilities. Life in Africa is more practical. That does not mean that there is no room for creativity, but in practical mission, creativity is the art of making good and beautiful things happen with the people and talents one actually has.

I believe such is a model for mission everywhere, including in the West. Just as we who lead the Lord's song should not try to create copies of St. Louis or Chicago in Brazzaville or Ouagadougou, we should not try to duplicate the music of Nashville or Los Angeles recording artists or the choral and organ artistry of English cathedrals where the context does not call for it. The Lord has given each of us a time and place to nurture His song. Our call as pastors, cantors, and worship leaders is to get the people singing the psalms, hymns, and Spiritual songs of the Church according to the talents the Lord has placed in our midst. When we do so, questions of community, unity, and outreach will naturally be answered.

Endnotes

¹ Robert Kolb, Timothy J. Wengert, and Charles P. Arand, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), 42.