

Stulken, Marilyn Kay. (1981) *Hymnal Companion to the Lutheran Book of Worship*. Philadelphia: Fortress.

Hymnal Supplement 98 Handbook. (1998) LCMS Commission on Worship. CPH.

Internet Resources: *The Cyber Hymnal* at: <http://www.cyberhymnal.org/> (Information on composers, texts, and tunes.)

The Lutheran Hymnal.Com at: <http://www.lutheran-hymnal.com/> (Major Lutheran Hymnals on line.)

Lutheran Music Site from *Thrivent Financial for Lutherans*:
<http://www.thrivent.com/heritage/music/16/index.html>. (Contains audio interviews and music selections, photographs and illustrations for Lutheran music from the 16th century to the present.) **Note:** While the Internet has many good hymn resources, there also are many inferior Web sites on hymnody. Always be careful to double check Web site information that seems suspect.

⁴ Often the greatest hymns are written in the most desperate of times. Luther, Gerhardt, and Nicolai lived through times of war, famine, plague, and political upheaval. Nicolai, for example, was pastor in Unna, Westphalia, when a seven-month plague killed over 1,400 townspeople, many of whom were his parishioners. Yet, in the midst of this horror, he wrote the *Wake, Awake* and *How, Brightly Shines the Morning Star*, which are known as the king and queen of chorales. These have brought the world comfort, joy, peace, and hope for over 400 years.

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Professionally Speaking

Topics for Terrific Teachers
in Lutheran Schools

Something to Sing About

November 2007

Written by
Jeffrey Burkart

Something to Sing About

A Heritage Worth Preserving

Lutheran hymnody was one of the great gifts of the Reformation. The Lutheran church has long been known as “the singing church” and has, as part of its heritage, hymns written by people who have articulated the gospel through their hymns. This year marks the 400th anniversary of the birth of one of the greatest Lutheran hymn writers, Paul Gerhardt (1607-1676).¹ Gerhardt wrote hymns such as *All My Heart This Night Rejoices*, *Awake, My Heart, with Gladness*, *Now Rest Beneath Night’s Shadow*, and *O Sacred Head, Now Wounded*.

The hymns of Paul Gerhardt, Phillip Nicolai, Martin Luther, and other hymn writers of the Reformation are filled with deep theological insights and should be both sung and studied by children and adults.² However, if one were to ask children who attend Lutheran schools if they recognize the names above (with the possible exception of Luther), one would probably get a blank stare or a shoulder shrug. They probably have sung hymns by these writers, but who the composers were and why they wrote their hymns is a mystery to them – and that’s a shame.

As part of the living musical heritage of the Reformation, all worthy hymns from every nation and race should be studied in Lutheran schools, so that children will learn to recognize gospel-centered hymns and immediately claim them as “their own.”

What’s Behind the Hymn?

Children in Lutheran schools need to sing great hymns and sing them often. Additionally, students

should be given the opportunity to carefully study hymn texts, learn about hymn authors and composers, and, whenever possible, memorize hymns.

Information on ancient and modern hymns abounds. Excuses like, “I’m not a musician, so I don’t feel qualified to teach about hymns,” are unacceptable. Hymnal handbooks from major publishers are easy to find, and the Internet has numerous sites that provide recorded music, hymn texts, biographies, pictures of hymn writers, and bibliographic resources.³

If composers are alive and kicking, children should be encouraged to write to them and inquire about how and why the composer’s hymn was written. A university student recently complained that she could not find “any information” about the hymn she was presenting in my Teaching the Faith course. I asked if she had attempted to contact the author; she had not. I immediately phoned the author and he happened to be home. He gave my student a fifteen-minute interview that provided more information than she could possibly use in her ten-minute presentation.

Composers are quite willing to talk about their work. They are happy that someone is interested in their composition and usually go “all out” in their responses – especially to children. Composers’ contact information can usually be obtained from their publisher.

Establish a Plan

Every Lutheran school should plan to make intentional hymn study commonplace. A “hymn of the month” could be learned by the entire school, or teachers could have children study hymns that relate to themes of each season of the church year. A systematic approach to hymn study relates to many segments of the

curriculum, such as music, history (biography, historical inquiry), language arts (vocabulary study, writing, oral interpretation, speech, poetry, literature), and, of course, religion.

The greatest hymns of the church are written by believers in the grace and mercy of God and contain the great truth that salvation comes through faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior. Establish a plan to make hymn study an intentional part of your school’s curriculum. Whether the plan is simple or complex, its major goals focus on proclaiming the good news and helping children understand that the best hymns help them to “fix their eyes on Jesus.”

Studying hymns, their composers, the historical settings in which they penned their words should be both inspirational and enjoyable.⁴ Commit your school to the robust study of hymns; your teachers and their students truly will have “something to sing about.”

Endnotes

¹ See LCMS web page on Gerhardt at: <http://www.lcms.org/pages/internal.asp?NavID=11367>
Also see: www.hymnsandcarolsofchristmas.com/Hymns_and_Carols/Biographies/paul_gerhardt.htm

² Phillip Nicolai (1556-1608) wrote *Wake, Awake, for Night Is Flying* and *O Morning Star, How Fair and Bright*; Martin Luther (1438- 1546) wrote *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God* and *Lord, Keep Us Steadfast in Your Word* to name just a few.

³ **Books:** Polack, W.G. (1942) *The Handbook to the Lutheran Hymnal*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House.

Precht, Fred L. (1992) *Lutheran Worship Hymnal Companion*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House.