

## SELECTION OF HYMNS FOR SUNDAY CHURCH SERVICE IN THE METHODIST CHURCH GHANA: AN EVALUATION

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**ABSTRACT:** *Methodism was born in song is an opening statement in the preface of the Methodist Hymn Book. Indeed the Methodists have not ceased to sing hymns in their worship since its establishment. Hymns that are sung for Sunday divine services have carefully been selected for several reasons. The paper evaluates the factors that motivate the selection of hymns in the Methodist Church, particularly for Sunday divine services. Through interviews of dedicated choirmasters and choristers as well as Reverend Ministers and local preachers, the authors present an assessment of the justifications behind selection of suitable hymns for church services. The authors argue that the paper will provide local preachers, pastors and reverend ministers an insight to selecting appropriate hymns for church services.*

**KEYWORDS:** Selection, Hymns, Methodist Church, Sunday divine services

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### INTRODUCTION

#### The Development of Christian Hymnody

The Methodist Church Ghana is one of the early orthodox churches that were established by the European missionaries. In the early Christian church, the liturgy centred on a ritual commemorating the Last Supper of Jesus and his disciples as recounted in the New Testament (Matt.26: 30). The instituted pattern of worship at the time included singing of translated Western hymns, which favoured only the few educated elite. The liturgy of the early churches including the Methodist church was predominantly indoctrinated with Western culture. (Amuah 2014:18)

During the middle ages a rich hymnody developed in the form of *Gregorian chant*.<sup>1</sup> Monastic choirs sang this type in unison, in one of eight church modes, and most often. While they were written originally in Latin, many have been translated into German and English. A familiar hymn of this type is the 11<sup>th</sup> century plainsong *Divinum Mysterium*, (although the words of *The Father's Love Begotten* date back to around the 4<sup>th</sup> century), that is, a common part of church Christmas repertoires in the English language.

Many a times, preachers, liturgists, choirmasters or people responsible for selection of hymns for church services do the selection arbitrary. Selection has usually been done in view of the fact that the tune is beautiful to the selector, or the texts speak to the preacher, liturgist or the choirmaster in a different way, and not that, the hymns address the theme of the year, month or day. This paper, which seeks to elaborate on how good hymns, could be selected for church services have six sections. The first section introduces the paper and indicates the need for it.

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<sup>1</sup> Gregorian chant is liturgical chant of the Roman Catholic Church that is sung to Latin words in a free style without accompaniment.

In the second section, the author addresses what makes a hymn a quality one, whilst the third section speaks the selection of suitable hymns for church services at any particular occasion. In the section that follows, the paper indicates a variation in hymn singing or choirs, which present hymns. In the last two sections the author offer suggestions and concludes respectively.

The protestant Reformation produced a burst of hymn writing and congregational singing. Martin Luther is notable not only as a reformer, but as the author of many hymns including *Ein'feste Burg ist unser Gott* (A mighty fortress is our God [MHB 494]) which is sung today even in Roman Catholicism. Luther and his followers often used their hymns, or chorales, to teach tenet of the faith to worshippers. Later hymn writers took even more freedom included *allegory* and *metaphor* in their texts. Four-part harmony also became the norm, rather than unison singing. Charles Wesley's hymns spread Methodist theology, not only within Methodism, but in most Protestant churches.

Most Methodist Churches today are using hymn tunes (MHB) in the reggae or highlife music style although this often led to some controversy between older and younger generation congregants in the early 1980's. Currently, the Christian pop music style which begun in the late 1960's became very popular during the 1970s, as young hymnists sought ways to make the music of their religion relevant for their generation. Some newly created churches include within hymnody, the traditional hymns (usually addressed to God), *praise choruses* (often sung scripture texts) and *gospel songs* (expressions of one's personal experience of God).

### Qualities of a Good Hymn

Price (1937) posits, "Christian hymn is a lyric poem, reverently and devotionally concerned, which is designed to be sung and which expresses the worshipper's attitude toward God, or God's purposes in human life. It should be simple and metrical in form. Genuinely emotional, poetic and literary in style, spiritual in quality, and in its ideas so direct and so immediately apparent as to unify a congregation while singing it". The essential features of the above definition are as follows:

- i. A metrical poem,
- ii. Reverent and devotional in nature,
- iii. Poetic and literary in styles,
- iv. Spiritual in quality,
- v. Expresses the worshipper's attitude toward God and
- vi. Unites the congregation who sings it.

Tennyson (1809-1892) further explains, "a good hymn is the most difficult poem in the world to write and perform". The statement highlights the nature of the hymn as one of the most strictly limited types of literature. Its first limitation is that it must possess qualities of lyric poetry. It must be sung! But its strictures are even greater since it must also express religious truth. Furthermore, when it must be a medium of concerted action and feeling simple enough to be performed congregationally, its restraints are compounded and multiplied. Therefore, in the final analysis, the hymn represents a unique form and literary art, sustaining a relationship to poetry and somewhat akin to that of prayer and prose. It is a type of poetry existing by itself, having qualities that are distinctly on its own. On the contrarily Machilus, quoting Brahms said, "it is not hard to compose, but it is wonderfully hard to let the superfluous notes fall under the table" (1984:108).

Some Church musicians would go far as to affirm that the hymn 'per se' is not to be considered a subdivision of lyrical poetry at all. Rather, they claim that it is so distinct that it fits into category neither of poetry nor prose. Hymns may indeed be poetry-like; however, they do not have to be true poems to achieve status as true hymns. Be as it may, the purely artistic appreciation of hymn as poems have a legitimate place in worship and devotion. All the same, though a hymn does not have to exhibit all the characteristics considered above to qualify as poems, they have both religious and aesthetic values when they do. For instance, the canticles and other early Christian hymns according to Benson (1930), were natural creative expressions of the early spirit filled Christians. According to James Montgomery (1828), "a hymn ought to be a regular in its structure as any other poem; it should have distinct subject, and the subject should be simple, not complicated, so that whichever skill or labour might be required on the part of the reader to understand it". Biblical scholars generally agree that certain passages of scripture were early Christian hymns and criteria have been developed for identifying these texts.

To distinguish the qualities of these Christian hymnals from the biblical passages, D. von Dehsen summarizes these criteria as follows: The hymn contains vocabulary which is difficult from that of the surrounding context. The lyrics are written in poetic form, that is, the ordering flow of hymn tunes makes the speech rhythm very meaningful to individuals and congregation as a whole. Furthermore, the content of the passage interrupts the context. Words are used in the passages, which are found nowhere else in the New Testament. In some cases, the name deity is absent and is replaced by a relative clause or a participle. All the same, the cosmic role of God of Christ is emphasized. Finally, the Theological concepts and Christological doctrine are expressed in exalted and liturgical language.

The introduction of congregational singing which was pioneered by Martin Luther (1483-1546), in the Protestant churches had become a gate-way for the study of hymnology today. "John Wesley was never wrong when he said that 'Methodism was born in song'; and true to what he observed at that time, the Methodists have since its inception have never ceased to sing" (Methodist Praise 1: iii) therefore, its social benefits acquired by Methodist Churches nationwide cannot be over emphasized. Currently, such hymnals as the Old Methodist Hymn Book (OMHB), Methodist Hymnal (MH), Methodist School Hymnal (MSH), Methodist Hymn Book (MHB), *Christian Asor Ndwom* (CAN) and *Kristofow Nwoma Ndwom* (KNN), like its predecessors, were intended for use in private devotion as well as in public worship.

In a Ghanaian context, a logical statement to be discussed at this crucial point is the problems confronting the Rev. Ministers, catechists, local preachers, class Leaders, choirmasters and/or organists in hymns selection for a particular liturgical service; for example, Sunday Service.

### **Selection of Suitable Hymns for Service**

Selection of hymns for church service is based on a few factors. First, knowing the day's Theme is of vital importance. It is necessary to consult the preacher if the selector is not the preacher first or finding the hymns on the almanac. In order to gain deep meaning of the chosen theme, it is better on the choirmaster or organist's part to read the chosen passages (Bible Lessons) before attempting to select the appropriate hymns for the Sunday Church service. The seasons or the seasonal themes should be taken into account so that the selected hymns could be suitable for use on any particular day. For example, lent, advent, Christmas, Easter, and so on.

The event or occasion for the day should not be forgotten as far as the selection of Sunday Church service hymns is concerned. Hymn singing alone reminds the congregation what is happening at that particular moment. For instance, singing of *Joy to the World, the Lord is come* during Easter festive is questionable because the hymn best fits Christmas.

Musically, the weaknesses and strengths of the congregation is also another factor to consider when hymns are to be selected. Knowing your choir and their singing style count a lot. For example, some church choirs cannot perform popular hymns in minor keys. Therefore, the capabilities of the choir and the congregation in terms of their singing habit may prompt the right approach in selecting suitable hymns.

Furthermore, the choice of popular hymn-tunes is very important to be considered. The reason is that some hymns may have more than two tunes. For the religious benefits of the congregation, it is left to the choirmasters and/organists to do their home work more realistic. In selecting hymn-tunes for Sunday Church service, the choirmasters and organists must exercise patient before making attempt. For the sake of annual or biannual choir conference, anniversary celebration, radio programmes and hymn analysis, there is the need to consider more popular and well accepted tunes.

The features that constitute a good hymnal include the following: hymn title, seasonal theme, meter, tune name, composer and the poet. In the MHB most of the hymns have different composers and poets whose names are written immediately after the stanzas. To this end, the following lists indicate the compilation of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries Methodist Church composers whose hymn tunes have been published in the Ghana Praise for elementary hymnological research and analysis. Here are some examples:

<b>Nineteenth Century Hymnists</b>	<b>Twentieth Century Hymnists</b>
Acquaah, Gaddiel R. (1884-1954)	Amankwah, A. E. (1936-date)
Allotey-Pappoe, J. E. (born 1887)	Baiden, Kwesi (born 1919-1983)
Blankson, Oman Ghan (1899-1974)	Bessa-Simons, William (1909-1984)
Graves, Charles E. (1884-1929)	Bilson, Ernest C. snr. (born 1907)
Yarney, S.M.H.B. (1894-1976)	Entsua-Mensah, Alfred (born 1906)
Loo, Isaac Daniel (1896-1944)	Koomson, Gershom (born 1905)
	Nzeh, D. F.
	Riverson, Isaac Daniel (1901-67)
	Sam, Herbert B. (born 1915)
	Yankey, J. A.

In search of hymns tunes, it came to light that similar compilation of two hundred and twenty nine ancient and modern hymn tunes had been published in the Methodist Praise (2008) under the tenure of Professor J. Y. Sekyi-Baidoo (National Director of Music of the Association of Methodist Church Choirs, Ghana) purposely to guide choirmasters, organists, choristers, preachers and the entire Methodist congregation.

## Variations in Hymn Singing

Before any choir can perform creditably during musical concert, choral competition and on both radio and television programmes depends much on the choir's numerical strengths, composition, and their capabilities. Therefore, to enjoy good musical performance by a well-prepared choir, attention must be drawn to varieties of songs and variations. These and other factors have become necessary because some church choirs are associated with one particular type of musical style all the time. In this wise, there is the need to vary our singing habit to break the monotony and give way for creativity.

- **HARMONY:** Harmony may be simply defined as the clothing the melody; that is, combination of such individual parts as Treble, Alto, Tenor and Bass (SATB) together. Various parts that constitute blending of parts (harmony) exist in different institutions, societies and churches where the singing group functions. For instance, among the Men's Fellowship, Male choir is believed to have been formed, therefore, one may expect 1<sup>st</sup> Tenor, 2<sup>nd</sup> Tenor, 1<sup>st</sup> Bass and 2<sup>nd</sup> Bass (TTBB).
- **UNISON:** Encouraging all the parts to sing only a specific melody or part; for example, the Treble part can be sung at a higher or lower level pitch so as to suit both female and the male voices as well.
- **UNISON AND DESCANT:** In most cases, Treble singers are requested to sing the Descant (higher pitch other than the normal part ranges) whilst the rest of the parts sing in Unison. Actually, any of the part can be used as the descant, especially either Alto or Tenor part. This style of singing creates a harmonious creativity in choral music.
- **MALE AND FEMALE VOICES:** Individual voices of the opposite sex can be encouraged to perform some sections or portions of the music. For example, male voices singing the first two lines while their female counterpart continues with the third and fourth lines of the same *stanza* in the form of 'Call and Response', For instance, Male-Female-Male, then Harmony (all parts), etc.
- **MALE AND FEMALE CHOIR:** The formation of both Male and Female choir within a large choir (SATB) takes into consideration the size or the composition of the former. Male choir constitutes only males singers as mentioned in the second points. For instance, we have TTBB for short, 1<sup>st</sup> Tenor, 2<sup>nd</sup> Tenor, 1<sup>st</sup> Bass and 2<sup>nd</sup> Bass.
- **INDIVIDUAL PERFORMANCE:** Chances must be given to individual singers for 'self expression'; for example, SOLO (one person or one voice/instrument performing), DUET (two persons or two-part singing), TRIO (three persons or three parts singing), QUARTET (four persons or four parts singing), QUINTET (five persons or five parts singing), and so on. DOUBLE QUARTET therefore implies eight persons or eight parts singing, and so on.
- **A Cappella** singing is of vital importance during practices, rehearsals and church services. This method puts every singer on the alert.

With effective Radio, Television Programmes and Choral Festivals in mind, intensive and thorough practices and rehearsals are highly recommended for a successful musical performance.

For an effective selection of hymns to be accomplished, the Methodists in their hymn Book have provided a reference analysis as a guide. Find below is the guide.

## Reference Analysis of the Methodist Hymn Book (MHB) 1933 ed. staff notation with Tunes

- 984 hymns with Tunes (pages 1-885)
- 5 Amen (pages 886-7)
- 50 Verses: hymnal texts only (pages 888-91)
- 32 Additional Tunes (pages 892-907)
- 74 Ancient Hymns: Numbers 1-64 Canticles and Psalms **with** tunes (pages 908-975)
- Numbers 65-74: Canticles and Psalms **without** tunes (pages 976-81)
- 2 Ten Commandments: Numbers 75 & 76 (pages 982-83)
- 6 Responses to the Commandments (pages 983-88)
- The Beatitudes (3) : Number 77 (pages 989-90)
- The Lord's Prayer: Number 78 (page 991)
- *I. Index of Ancient Hymns, Canticles, Psalms, and Passages of Scripture (pages 992-3)*
- *II. Index of Tunes : Alphabetically Arranged (pages 994-1001)*
- *III. Metrical Index of Tunes (pages 1002-9)*
- *IV. Composers, Arrangers, and Sources of Tunes (pages 1010-19)*
- *V. Index of Authors, Translators, and Sources of Hymns (1020-23)*
- *VI. Hymns with Tunes and Metres (pages 1024-41)*
- *VII. First Line of Hymns For Little Children and Verse Section (1042)*

**Suggestions/Recommendations**

As Krone pointed out, "there are differences of opinion among conductors as to the value of memorization of songs. Some believe that all songs should be memorized, since it is only then that the singers can be free from the domination of the printed symbols so that they can concentrate on the elements that make for a good performance, and can give all their attention to the conductor" (1945:46).

With regards to the foregoing compliment, I suggest that at least the first, second and last stanzas of every hymn taught or learnt must be sung from memory. In my conversation during visits in Accra, it could be observed that most of the Methodist Singing Band members who are non-literates sing hymns without hymn books (Therefore, memorization which was the oldest form of learning should be recommended and encouraged in all the Methodist Churches as it was used as part of Sunday School curricula between 1970s and 1980s.

Congregational singing, which has become the bedrock in the Methodist Churches nationwide, must be strengthened during class meetings, prayer meetings, dawn broadcast, door-to-door evangelism and outreach programmes. This is because, most of the youth adhere to the singing of praises and gospel songs in the style of highlife, reggae, calypso and slow rock thereby forgotten the singing of such liturgical music like ancient canticles, psalms, hymns and anthems. In addition, young organists must not only focus on contemporary or modern hymn tunes but also play the set tunes and select from the thirty two (32) additional tunes in the MHB.

Wednesday Hymn Singing by the Basic School children in the Methodist Educational Unit must also be re-introduced to encourage the learning and subsequent memorization of hymns.

The singing of hymns and canticles should be made of choral competitions during anniversaries or conferences at all levels to motivate hymn singing. That will provide an outlet for choirmasters and organists to give comments and correct errors when hymns are to be performed and to inform the appropriateness of hymn singing at any point in time. Moreover,

quizzes based on hymns and hymn-tunes and their suitability at points on the churches programmes should be organized to climax choir anniversaries at the circuit level.

The practicing and singing of hymns, enjoyment of favourite hymn tunes and memorizing the stories behind them do not only constitute hymnology but the study of the literature aspects of hymns also will go a long way to motivate individual members of the congregation to study the contents of the Methodist hymnals. That will reinforce what Polman (1964) had stated in his article.

## CONCLUSION

Hymns function in the mission of the church in several ways. In proclamation the hymn functions as a vehicle for sharing the good news. In worship the hymn is an instrument of corporate devotion. In education the hymn is a means for Christian instruction, and in ministry the hymn functions as an inspiration for social service. Some hymns relate to several of these functions; other hymns focus primarily on one. Persons who bear leadership responsibility for congregational singing can profit greatly from an awareness of the potential use of hymns in fulfilling the church's mission and their specific application in accomplishing in the tasks of proclamation, worship, education, and ministry.

One basic reason is that hymns are a means of communicating the message of the church. Some hymns are paraphrases of scripture and others are based on specific scripture verses. Hymns also convey the church's theology. While listening to a sermon is usually a passive experience, hymn singing involves the congregation in active participation. Furthermore, hymns are sung over and over again, season to season and year after year. They teach effectively through repetition. Moreover, their melodies tend to linger long in the memory, carrying the thoughts connected to congregation into the mind and heart.

The teaching of hymns is an avenue for passing on the heritage of the church to the future generation. One cannot study hymnody without encountering such giants in the history of the Christian church as Ambrose of Milan, John of Damascus, Francis of Assisi, Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Wesley, John Mason Neale, and Harry Emerson Fosdick. Through a study of hymns one can also learn about poetic form and style, including meter, rhyme, and the various poetic devices. Much of the musical heritage of the church is encountered in hymnology (the practical study of and about hymns).

Hymns should also be taught for their value in helping a congregation or an individual to worship. Sometimes when worshippers lack words to express their feelings, they find them expressed meaningfully in the words of a hymn. On the other hand, the practices whereby the preachers announce the hymn number and continue reading the texts aloud for the organist to introduce the tunes interrupt the tempo when congregation joins in. In order to prompt the organist on duty, it is recommended that preachers must at least read the first and the last stanzas of each hymn being announced.

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