

Worship Planning Toolbox for Lay Leaders: Hymn selection

You may wonder why I've waited so long to talk about hymn selection. After all, that's where the rubber meets the road in worship planning! Partly, it's because I was busy, to be honest. Partly, because I had to figure out how to "map out" the discussion. I've decided to treat relatively traditional hymns and hymn sources in this presentation. That means I'm going to ask you to break out your LBW, ELW, or LSB today. I plan to address the selection of contemporary hymnody in an upcoming video. It presents some unique challenges and opportunities, although at least some of what we discuss today will tie into the next installment.

And there's another reason for the long wait - really, the main reason. Hymn selection will be easier, more intentional, and more helpful to forming folks into better worshippers of the Triune God, once you've absorbed and digested the previous sessions on topics like the shape and flow of the liturgy, the church year, and the lectionary. Now we will get into some of the nuts and bolts. But having all of that other stuff in your mind and "planning toolkit" will enable you to use the resources, map out a season's worth of hymns, teach less familiar hymns, and in general navigate the hymn selection part of worship planning with less drama.

And that leads to our first question: *Why is it so hard to pick hymns* – and to do so without getting yelled at for your selections? Here are some reasons.

- Most people aren't familiar with many hymns. This includes pastors. They have a few favorites, and a somewhat larger number they sort of know.
- Most people don't read music, and they're not confident singers. This includes pastors. They pick things up "by ear" – listening, then tentatively singing along with the stronger singers. If they really like a tune, eventually "learning by ear" morphs into "singing by heart."
- Most people don't know how to match hymns with Scriptures or the themes of the day/season. Pastors may be better at this, but if they're oblivious to the unfamiliarity of a tune, the good theology in a hymn will probably be wasted. People will shut their hymnals, ears, and minds to the words if they don't like and can't "learn by ear" an unfamiliar tune!
- Most people don't know what resources are available - in the hymnal or elsewhere. This includes pastors. Are you sensing a theme?
- Most people don't want to get picked on when they choose an unpopular or unfamiliar hymn! Rinse and repeat: this includes pastors!! Sadly, a lot of worship wars feature "I hate those stupid hymns they're inflicting on us" as a major battle. It's not just contemporary versus traditional, either!

Fortunately, there's help. That's why we're here today. What are some of the tools at your disposal as you plan the hymns for worship?

- First, hymnals have excellent, under-utilized resources for hymn selection.

- In the front of our major hymnals – LBW, ELW, and LSB - is a 3-year lectionary cycle of readings. This helps you choose hymns based on the important themes in one or more of the appointed lessons. You might want to review the session on lectionaries as a refresher!
- **A MAJOR NOTE:** the LBW lectionary is outdated. It represents the first “go” at a 3-year lectionary, and it’s been superseded by the Revised Common Lectionary (in ELW) and the LSB/Sola variant thereof. You can still use the older LBW lectionary, but there aren’t any supporting resources anymore, and I don’t follow it when I compile my hymn suggestions. I’m already using the two lectionaries most commonly used in Lutheran churches!
- **Yes, you can certainly just rely on the bulletin inserts you might be getting from one of the publishing houses.** But if they’re not immediately handy and you want to plan ahead anyway, you *can* still do that work.
- Let’s start by taking a look at the lectionary in the front of ELW. It starts on page 37. The readings for each Sunday in all 3 cycles [cycle A (Matthew), B (Mark), and C (Luke)] are laid out. For Advent 1 through Holy Trinity Sunday, its pretty straightforward. But because the date of Easter causes the Pentecost season to shrink or contract, things get a tad tricky in that long green season!
- **For the season after Pentecost,** you generally find the readings based on 1-week “Windows.” **NOTE: If the first few Pentecost season offerings actually are for dates that come before Holy Trinity in the year you’re in,**

ignore them and use the readings for the appropriate Easter season Sunday, or for Pentecost or Trinity Sunday. *After Holy Trinity, pick up with the proper “week window.”* Don’t worry, there are “prompts” embedded in this resource to help you navigate. For example on page 39, look at the “week window” for Sunday, June 12-18. In parentheses, it adds, “(if after Holy Trinity.)” Then it says, “Time after Pentecost – Lectionary 11.”

- Sadly, in the ELW calendar, you don’t count a Sunday as being “the Xth Sunday After Pentecost.” It’s “Lectionary Y.” Honestly, I don’t know why they did that, but just accept it as a complicating mystery of life.
- Let’s switch gears to examine life in the other major lectionary. If you use the LSB/Sola calendar, the Lutheran Service Book lectionaries begin on page xiv. (LSB also has a 1-year lectionary which I’ll ignore for now; you can probably figure out how to use it pretty easily). The LSB designation is by “Proper Number” and “week window.” The Sola calendar, which is based on the LSB 3-year lectionary, uses both “Sunday after Pentecost” and “Proper” designations. Just remember, the “ordinary/proper time” started back in the Epiphany green season and resumes after Pentecost! When I send out hymn suggestions, I try to hit every terminology iteration you might regularly encounter. This is the most complicated thing you’ll have to navigate; it really isn’t too bad once you get into it, especially since you’ll generally be using only one hymnal, and one lectionary, as your primary resource.

- Moving on: At the rear of all our Lutheran hymnals are several useful indexes.
 - The LBW has a section for possible Hymn of the Day selections for every Sunday in the year, for all 3 cycles. Handy, but check whether the readings are what you're using – see NOTE regarding LBW lectionary. The ELW and LSB don't feature that, but the great "LSB Hymn Selection Guide" (a spiral bound treasure!) resource does.
 - There's a *topical* index. **Generally, major topics have a section of their own in the hymnal proper: witness, hope, forgiveness, etc.** You'll see them in the index, too with other hymns that may fit in several topics, *including* the one you're looking at. Additionally, there are topics like commissioning, city, inner life, and the like. Obviously some hymns will fall in several slots! But if you glance at the readings, you'll see key words or themes. Check this topical index for help finding hymns that touch on themes in one or more of the lessons.
 - There's a *Tune Name* index. For example, consider the hymn, "The Church's One Foundation." In LBW, it's hymn #369; in ELW, #654; in LSB, #644. At the end of the hymn you'll see on the bottom left who wrote the music and who wrote the text. On the bottom right is the hymn tune name – "Aurelia" – and

its meter (76 76 D) – how many syllables in how many lines.

Those are handy pieces of information!

- Go to the back of the hymnal to the “Tune Name/Tunes - Alphabetical/Alphabetical Index of Tunes” index, and look up “Aurelia.” You’ll discover it’s used for another hymn, so even if you *thought* your congregation didn’t know LBW #197, “O Living Bread From Heaven,” they probably know the tune. So it’s an easy one to introduce if by chance folks hadn’t tried it.
- The “*Tunes – Metrical*” (LBW) or “*Metrical Index of Tunes*” (ELW) is a great resource. Remember, most hymns are like poems set to music; and most poems have a particular meter. Let’s turn back to “The Church’s One Foundation.” Under the name “Aurelia” is the meter, 76 76 D. That means a line of 7 syllables, followed by one of 6, then 7, then 6, and all that is repeated, or Doubled.
- Turn to the metrical index of tunes, find 76 76 D. There are a lot, all with different tune names! If you looked them all up, you’d find some familiar ones and a bunch of “Huh?” tunes. Let’s say you looked up one – “Kuortane.” It’s a Finnish tune. Although it’s fairly simple, possibly nobody at your church knows it, and you may not have a strong vocal leader. But it’s a paraphrase of the Song of Simeon, after he blessed Mary and baby Jesus in the Temple, which may fit the reading for

the day! What to do? Well, the tune for “The Church’s One Foundation” – Aurelia – has the same meter. Try singing it to that, see if it works! (Hint: some tunes will NOT be good matches for some words! Gotta hum or sing it out loud first before you suggest a substitution!)

- There are many popular metrical schemes, and each of them has at least a few hymn tunes you know well. When in doubt, try a simple swap. **Just alert your musicians ahead of time...!** In fact, this “swap the tune” stuff is a good thing about which to collaborate with your musician – he or she can play through a few likely tunes, and probably has a good idea of which are the most singable for your parishioners.

- Finally, there’s the “*First Line of A Hymn*” index. Very helpful, for obvious reasons!

There are a couple of other indexes, but unless you’re planning a service with nothing but hymns by Nicolai Grundvig or from the early American Sacred Harp resource, you can safely skip them for now.

- Oh, one more thing. You can go online and search for appropriate hymns based on texts or on the Sunday of the Church year. You may get suggestions for hymns that don’t appear in our Lutheran hymnals though, which may slow you down. Or you could obtain (for free) my hymn suggestions, either by accessing them on the Core worship resource page, or by getting them directly from me.

Okay, now you've got a few "navigation and selection" tools under your belt. But what if you find a great hymn that isn't familiar, especially if you can't easily swap melodies? Well, introducing unfamiliar hymns doesn't need to be as painful or dramatic as we sometimes dread! In fact, you can tackle it in a fairly orderly fashion, with a little help from your friends.

- First: As I described in the previous section, sometimes you *can* introduce a hymn whose words are powerful and faithful to the Scriptures of the day, by substituting a more familiar hymn tune. Just be careful. A bright bouncy tune might be an awkward match for a meditative prayer text, and vice versa! And watch out for tunes that – even though the meter is right and the tune is familiar – end up putting the accent on the penulTIMate syllABLE and everything sounds dorky. Just try singing “Praise God From Whom All Blessings Flow” to “Children of the Heaven’y Father”, or vice versa!

- Second: If you're not sure what the congregation knows, talk to the musician. He or she probably has a notation of what hymn was sung when – and what *hasn't* been sung. Also, ask either the musician, or someone who happily sings the hymns, to sit down and go through the hymnal with you. Take your time. Go through a couple of dozen hymns at a time, and maybe use a different color highlighter to indicate what hymns in, say, the Advent or Holy Communion sections are *familiar*, which ones are *sung but are less familiar*, which ones are *unfamiliar*. That gives you a good base line.

- Use the “sandwich method” of hymn selection, especially if you’re introducing an unfamiliar tune. The opening and closing hymns might well be real “Bread and Butter” hymns: familiar, and really singable. Try to be sensitive to the season or theme of the day, *but when in doubt, if you’re introducing one hymn that’s unfamiliar, go for something truly in the congregational comfort zone for all the others.* The Hymn of the Day is generally going to reflect the Gospel, some obvious theme of the day or season, or – if there’s a sermon series that may not follow the lessons very closely – it may reflect on the theme of that sermon. My “deal” with congregations is that they should expect theological “meat,” even if the tune is less familiar, in the Hymn of the Day. And I’ll make sure they sing “I Love to Tell the Story,” “How Great Thou Art,” or “On Eagles’ Wings” at the beginning or end!

- I’ve always liked introducing unfamiliar hymns through the “Hymn of the Month Club” method. Like I said at the beginning, many people aren’t sight readers; they learn “by ear.” And they’re not confident. But if they hear a tune several weeks in a row, they start picking it up “by ear.” So the first week, I’ll have the musician use it as the prelude and also have folks sing it as the hymn of the day. I may only use 2 or 3 verses if it’s long, and you’ll see why. Next week, we’ll sing 2-3 verses (opener and whatever we didn’t sing the week before) as the opening hymn. Third week, if appropriate, use a couple of verses as the

Hymn of Praise. Etc. By the end of the month, even if they end up hating it, they'll admit they were given a fair shot at learning it!

- Some older hymns can be found on the excellent online resource, Hymnary.org. And that resource will often give you some interesting tidbits that make a hymn more accessible. I always like using, for example, “Before You, Lord, We Bow” close to Independence Day, and I tell people that it was written by Francis Scott Key himself! Similarly, “Now Thank We All Our God” was written by a Lutheran pastor who buried most of his village – including his own wife – during the 30 Years War. “Abide With Me” was written by someone who knew he was dying. “Amazing Grace” was penned by a former slave trader. “All Glory, Laud, and Honor” was written by a monk who was imprisoned at the time. When you can find little tidbits like that, especially for hymns that aren't as familiar as the ones I just mentioned, it personalizes the hymn for people, and they take more interest and care in learning it. Plus they learn a few cool things!

A few other things to keep in mind about hymn selection. Remember, there's a flow and structure to the liturgy. You might not want “On Our Way Rejoicing” as the opening hymn, for example! If there's no communion, go easy on communion-themed hymns – but don't omit them entirely if the texts deal with feeding the 5000, or manna in the wilderness. I sometimes like to tweak a congregation that sits for the hymn of the day by having them

sing “Stand Up, Stand Up for Jesus,” but that’s me. And yes, I encourage them to stand up!

Also, keep in mind who’s up front on a given Sunday. Don’t introduce a new hymn when you have a substitute organist and a guest preacher who can’t carry a tune. In fact, make sure you run the hymns, especially the hymn of the day, by the preacher. Based on the theme of the sermon, he or she might have a more appropriate hymn to suggest. If the congregation knows it, use it. If not, collaborate to find one that’s suitable.

Finally, remember to honor the piety and loves of your congregation. You may not care for “Onward, Christian Soldiers,” “In the Garden,” or some other favorite. But lots of folks do. Please, don’t roll your eyes and sneer at them. Don’t relegate those hymns to one Sunday Hymn Sing a year. If they fit one of the Scriptures, the season or day of the year, or some other significant event being recognized, use them honestly, freely, and unironically. Your people will love you for it, be more likely to forgive an awkward selection – and you might find yourself unexpectedly tearing up when you see folks shut their hymnal, close their eyes, and sing that old hymn not by ear, but by heart.