

CHAPTER 3: "... and the Editor Edits."

Editors are necessary, even though writers usually see them more as destroying angels than as friends or partners in the art of writing and composing. Writers write what they do, and editors then must work through it all and find what fits their 'target audience'. And, in the case of a close fit, they are tasked in making the close fit a tight fit. While most writers will never actually admit to liking editors or even having talked sociably to one, they do nevertheless respect the difficult job they perform and agree they would hate to be the one to do it.

Many grand and glorious hymns exist outside any given hymnal – there is simply not room enough to hold all the hymns any given congregation could sing and enjoy and utilize in their public and private worship. (I have read an estimate of some six-million known Christian hymns.) So, guidelines must be drawn to narrow the field down to something usable. The editor is given these guidelines and then must go to work.

In the case of the current (1985) LDS hymnal, what were some of the guidelines that guided the Music Committee? Kathleen Lubeck wrote that –

"The direction given by the Brethren to the committee was to compile the new hymnbook with the general membership of the Church in mind, not just the musicians. "I told the committee that they had only one disability: they knew too much about music," said Elder Hugh W. Pinnock, managing director of the Priesthood Department and adviser to the Music Division. "Sometimes musicians, with their deeper understanding of music, will choose music that is artistic and technically correct, but not as singable for the average person. The committee has been sensitive to select hymns of worship that people will enjoy singing."

"Throughout the project there has been a spirit of unity between the Church leadership and the musicians working on the hymnbook, and the Brethren are very supportive of the work that has been done." Elder Pinnock had counseled the committee that if questions arose between musical expertise and spiritual promptings, the path of the Spirit was always the path to follow.

"We've tried to select music that people would want to hum as they walk down the street and go about their daily work," said Brother Moody. "We also wanted texts that could come to people's minds during times of trial or temptation, reinforcing gospel truths. As mentioned by the First Presidency in the preface, the hymns are to meet the needs of the members as individuals and as families, as well as groups of Saints in meetings."

"We had to feel strongly that each piece of music would do a great deal of good, that it would be loved, and that it would be of high enough quality that a member's spirit could be touched," added committee member Bonnie Goodliffe. "We wanted hymns that would touch our hearts in a Sabbath setting and stay with us during the week, too."

"As a result, during the selection process the committee members looked at the hymns' potential, rather than disqualifying them for errors in form or mechanics. "If we felt approval from the Spirit, we worked with the hymn, in consultation with the originator, until we felt it was right," said Marvin K. Gardner, committee member. "As we reviewed each new hymn, we prayed to know if it was pleasing to the Lord, and if it would bless the lives of Church

members. I'll never forget the many times I had the unmistakable feeling that the Spirit was indeed pleased with particular hymns and that I could without any reservation recommend that we use them. Each committee member felt that Spirit often.”¹

The overall goal was to create a volume of hymns people could sing in public and private – a book of hymns that would stay on their lips and carry them through the week; a book of hymns they could fall back upon to find faith, encouragement, comfort, and guidance.

But every primary goal has smaller, more-specific goals to aide them on reaching that one main goal. Let's look at some of them.

Length and Focus

“Jesus, the Very Thought of Thee” is one of my favorite hymns, but I'm rarely up to singing all fifteen verses in one setting, and few congregations would tolerate it. This would also cut into time allotted for other things during a worship service such as sermons and prayers. So, the editor gleans through the full version and harvests the verses that best express the message of the hymn as their congregation would see it, cutting the hymn down to a manageable size.

In the case of our current hymnal, the goal was to cut as many of the hymns as possible down to four verses, that being considered the manageable size of a hymn. There are notable exceptions – “A Poor, Wayfaring Man of Grief” and “How Firm a Foundation” being two of the hymns that could not be edited down without loosing the message of the hymn. “The Spirit of God”, however, lost two verses to make it more singable and to focus on one or two themes instead of three of four.

Language and Connotation

“Hark, How All the Welkin Rings” is one of Charles Wesley's greatest Christmas anthems, but no one in the past two-hundred years has known what a ‘welkin’ is. According to the 1828 Webster's Dictionary, it is “the visible regions of the air; the vault of heaven. This is obsolete, unless in poetry.” Notice that in 1828 it was already considered an obsolete word! Editors have revised this hymn to: “Hark, the Herald Angels Sing”. Other hymns with equally old language routinely receive such editing.

Many churches utilize Bible versions that do not hold to older forms of English, as does the King James Version. Hence, many hymns are being rewritten, replacing the thee and thy with modern pronouns. The LDS Church, however, continues to use the King James Version as its English-language Bible and encourages its members to learn this language and use it in prayer. It is worth our time to follow this instruction and to enjoy not only the Bible but the many hymns written in this beautiful language.²

When the 1989 Children's Songbook³ was being compiled, several texts were edited to remove the word 'gay' due to the current connotation the word carries - this was done at the request of Primary leaders who had written through the years, seeking a resolution to the use of this word and the struggle they had in teaching the children a definition other than the modern connotation. The committee did not

1 - The New Hymnbook: The Saints Are Singing! (ENSIGN Magazine, September 1985)

2 - See the Appendix for an essay on how to use the language of the King James Bible.

3 - Remarks concerning the 1989 Children's Songbook are gleaned from Patricia Kelsey Graham, WE SHALL MAKE MUSIC: Stories of the Primary Songs and How They came to Be (Springville, UT: Horizon) 2007

feel Primary was the time or place to explain the modern usage of the word as opposed to the traditional meaning of 'to be greatly happy' and took the opportunity to edit these texts while creating this book. The English teacher in me rebels over the thought that we don't take more time to teach our language to the next generation, but the Primary chorister in me agrees Primary is not the time and place for this struggle.

Doctrinal Exactness and Focus

W. W. Phelps, who edited Emma Smith's collection of hymns for the first LDS hymnal in 1835, heavily edited many hymns for that volume, giving many of them more a the restorationist theme that was so appreciated by early members of the Church. Much of these hymns reverted back to the original texts in later hymnals, while some of his editing is still with us today. Consider one hymn which he revised from a Christmas anthem to a millennial hymn:

as written by Isaac Watts:	as edited by W. W. Phelps:
Joy to the world! the Lord is come! Let earth receive her King; Let every heart prepare him room, And heav'n and nature sing.	Joy to the world! the Lord will come! And earth receive her King; Let ev'ry heart prepare him room, And saints and angels sing.

While later LDS hymnals returned this text to a Christmas theme and close to Watts' original text, Latter-day Saints still sing "Saints and Angels" as opposed to "Heaven and Nature" – while all of "Heaven and Nature" did rejoice at the events of this text, Latter-day Saints see it more precisely as the 'angels in heaven' and the 'Saints (followers of Christ) on Earth' as doing the actual singing. Hence LDS hymnals have retained the "saints and angels" while restoring much of the rest of it to its original text.

This doctrinal exactness extended into the creation of the 1989 Children's Songbook. Whereas Christians in general use the titles 'Lord' and 'God' interchangeably, Latter-day Saints use 'Lord' to refer to specifically to Jesus Christ and 'God' to refer to God our Heavenly Father. With the exception of "Tell Me, Dear Lord", simple edits were done to all other texts to bring them into conformity with this word usage.

Geographical, Historical, and Cultural Relevance

While the pioneering era of church history is still an historical heritage for all Latter-day Saints, the concepts of sacrifice, determination, community, and obedience in following the prophet are the concepts which carry the pioneering spirit into the next generation as opposed to the actual trek and its final destination. Thus the current LDS hymnal dropped or rewrote several hymns focusing on 'Utah' and 'the church' as identical entities – having become a world-wide organization, the church can no longer be represented even in hymns as an organization that centers its focus on one geographical locale and its culture, even though the pioneering heritage, spirit, and concept are still as valid today as they were in 1847.

To illustrate: following Hurricane Katrina's destructive fury in the summer of 2005, several hymnists wrote texts inspired by the storm and its destruction. Some centered on the storm in detail and its destruction; others concentrated on the concept of the fury of the storms in our lives and how God helps us survive and triumph over these 'storms of life'. I would predict that twenty years from now the hymns texts that will be remembered will be those which centered on the concept of the 'storms of life' as opposed to Hurricane Katrina itself, for once the memory of the single storm fades then the desire to sing about it will also fade.

It is interesting to note that hymnals of other faiths have finally begun to adopt various LDS-written hymns, and in doing so they have had to edit out LDS-specific history and culture to make them more universally relevant to their congregation. I have found the third verse of "Come, Come, Ye Saints" edited in several hymnals as:

We'll find the place which God for us prepared,
In His house full of light,
Where none shall come to hurt or make afraid;
There the saints will shine bright.
We'll make the air with music ring,
Shout praises to our God and King;
Above the rest these words we'll tell,
All is well! All is well!

While the average Latter-day Saint would be horrified over this editing, the average Christian whose ancestors did *not* cross the American continent in search of religious freedom would have no association with the original verse.

'Good Neighbor' Policy

The last thing one wants to do is offend others through their hymns. Hence, things that might have been important in the past are edited from some hymns to make them a little more friendly and inviting to our non-LDS neighbors. I'm not speaking of "politically-correct" so much as simply being a considerate neighbor.

"Praise to the Man", that classic hymn praising the life and works of Joseph Smith as a prophet of God, originally read -

"Long shall his blood which was shed by assassins
Stain Illinois, while the earth lauds his fame."⁴

Not only is it wrong to single out an entire state for what one governor and a handful of militia did, it is also wrong to not forgive. Vengeance belongs to the Lord, and we should leave it in His hands and move on. By editing this line to:

"Long shall his blood which was shed by assassins

4 - Deseret Sunday School Songbook, 1909, #24

Plead unto heaven, while the earth lauds his fame.”⁵

We show our neighbors we have forgiven the past and have moved on and am allowing the Lord to take care of any and all vengeance – and that we aren’t holding anyone alive responsible for what was done by long-dead assassins.

At the same time, why would we refer to the difference between ours and our neighbors’ religious beliefs as –

No more in slavish fear we mourn,
No yoke of Bondage wear;
No more beneath delusion groan,
Nor superstition fear.”⁶

We’d might as well throw mud in their faces as they enter our chapels! While it's true the restoration of the Gospel broke centuries of darkness, superstition, bondage, and ignorance, why insult our visiting neighbors by singing about it before they’ve even heard the Joseph Smith story? Hence this verse has been edited from “Come Listen to a Prophet’s Voice”, while the main theme of the hymn – an invitation to come and hear the word of God from the mouth of a living prophet - still stands firm and strong.

Another hymn that was revised under this Good Neighbor Policy was 'O Ye Mountains High'. Written at a time that the Saints were under extreme persecution in Utah and abroad, the second and third stanzas reflect the Saints' eventual victory over their enemies. With the composer's consent the language of the third and fourth stanzas was toned down:

Original Text:

In thy mountain retreat,
God will strengthen thy feet;
On the neck of thy foes thou shalt tread;
And their silver and gold,
as the prophets have told,
Shall be brought to adorn thy fair head...
Here our voices we'll raise,
and we'll sing to thy praise,
Sacred home of the prophets of God.
Thy deliv'rance is nigh;
thy oppresors shall die;
The Gentiles shall bow 'neath they rod...

Revised Text:

In thy mountain retreat,
God will strengthen thy feet;
Without fear of thy foes thou shalt tread;
And their silver and gold,
as the prophets have told,
Shall be brought to adorn thy fair head...
Here our voices we'll raise,
and we'll sing to thy praise,
Sacred home of the prophets of God.
Thy deliv'rance is nigh;
thy oppresors shall die;
And thy land shall be freedom's abode...

There were non-Latter-day Saints who encouraged us not to edit this hymn as all the imagery in the lines in question were Old Testament in nature and they took no offense. But the church music committee felt it worth the effort for those who would still take this hymn as a war challenge by Latter-

5 - Latter-day Saint Hymns, 1927, #167

6 - Ibid, #58

day Saints.

Part of this ‘Good Neighbor’ policy includes being inclusive in our worship with those already within our congregation. In the 1950 hymnal an attempt was made to create a single volume that was both a hymnal and a choir book, so many hymns in the choir section focused on hymns for men’s voices and hymns for women’s voices. W. W. Phelps’s text “Come, All Ye Sons of Zion” was included in the men’s choir section. A standard throughout previous hymnals, it is really more of a call to all church members; not just the men. So, to retain it in our current hymnal it was changed from a men’s song to a congregational song by editing one single word to “Come, All Ye Saints of Zion”, turning it into a hymn for men and women to share together.

All Hymns Are Valuable

If a hymn does not pass the editing process and become part of a hymnal, does this mean it was not a worthy hymn? Obviously some hymns are better than others, but it also means the editor simply ran out of room. Some hymnals have over one-thousand hymns, while others as few as one-hundred. The goal of the LDS Church Music Committee was a hymnal of manageable size that adequately covered a large range of gospel topics. Thus they had to limit not only the number of hymns but the number of hymns on any given topic.

Never did the Church Music Committee have the thought that all your gospel singing had to come from one hymnal! All Christians are free to explore and sing any hymn they find speaking from their heart, no matter where they find it. That fictional instruction that Latter-day Saints can only sing from the LDS hymnal at home and at church is just that - fictional.

If the writer and composer have felt the Spirit touch them while they wrote and composed, then it is a worthy hymn. If, in sharing it with family and friends, tears and been shed and lives have been changed, then it is a worthy hymn. Many worthy, otherwise-unpublished hymns grace family records, blessing the lives of the children and grandchildren of those who first wrote them. They have fulfilled their purpose as completely as those we sing every week from our hymnal.