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## Estate Planning: Psalms and Hymns for a Lifetime

Karen DeMol

*Dordt College*, [Karen.demol@dordt.edu](mailto:Karen.demol@dordt.edu)

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## Estate Planning: Psalms and Hymns for a Lifetime

### Abstract

"Singing classics of the faith that have been 'keepers' for decades and centuries enables the various generations within a congregation to sing together, strongly."

Posting about the rich heritage of classic hymns from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/estate-planning-psalms-and-hymns-for-a-lifetime/>

### Keywords

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### Disciplines

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### Comments

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# Estate Planning: Psalms and Hymns for a Lifetime

 [inallthings.org/estate-planning-psalms-and-hymns-for-a-lifetime/](http://inallthings.org/estate-planning-psalms-and-hymns-for-a-lifetime/)

Karen A. DeMol

May 10, 2018



I often hear stories of visits to elderly friends and family who suffer memory loss and dementia and who have forgotten most things—but who can still sturdily sing the Psalms and hymns learned long ago. These aging saints are no longer able to recognize their children who come to visit or to identify faces in family photos, but they can sing “The Lord’s My Shepherd” and “Crown Him With Many Crowns,” their vague eyes becoming bright as they do so.

And I wonder: with what songs are we equipping ourselves and our children for such a moment to come in our own lives? In an age of rapid song-turnover in our churches and schools, what enduring songs are we learning and using? For if the song repertoire of a worshipping community consists mainly or only of popular contemporary songs which have a limited lifespan and which are replaced every few years, what songs will nurture us for a lifetime and into advanced old age, what songs will enable the generations to sing together, what songs will be common to the Church at large?

Not that new songs are wrong, of course; many Psalms command us to “sing a new song to the Lord.” And, some new songs will become the great classics of the future. But not all. Many new songs are ephemeral. An interesting exercise can be to track the top contemporary Christian songs on websites ranking such songs and see how many years a song remains on the list.

In our efforts to be “contemporary” and “up-to-date” in our worship, some worshipping groups have turned largely or even exclusively to contemporary songs, allowing hymn classics and even Psalm-settings to fall into disuse. Whatever the good reasons for using contemporary songs are, there is a great loss to our communal worship and to our spiritual understanding and growth if we neglect Psalms and hymns. And singing a song for a few years only to have it replaced by other short-lived songs does not bode well for equipping ourselves with songs that nourish us into our old age. Our “estate planning” would do well to include equipping ourselves with songs that have nurtured the Church for decades and centuries.<sup>1</sup>

What, then, do we lose when we set aside classic hymns and Psalm-settings? In focusing only on recently-composed worship music, we lose the sense of worshipping with the Church of all times. In neglecting the Psalms, we lose the richness of a Biblical book of songs, which for thousands of years has nourished believers. In setting aside hymns, we lose the richness of texts that often deeply detail what we believe and even shape our response to that faith.

What do we gain by singing Psalms and hymns?

In addition to equipping ourselves with songs that nurture us for a life-time, there are many benefits to knowing and using classic hymns and Psalm-settings. Consider the following:

*Psalms and hymns can lead us forward in our faith understandings and expressions.* Psalms can begin with deep and difficult emotions, such as feelings of distance from God or abandonment in trouble, and move us from those dark places to trust and praise. The multiple-verse nature of hymns allows them to unfold a long story or doctrinal concept in depth and with deliberation.

*Hymns and Psalms are content-rich.* While many praise choruses express *how we feel* about our faith, many hymns express *what we believe*, in carefully crafted statements of faith. “Hymns tend to engage our imagination, intellect, and will together. Good hymns give us rich language and images that require us to think and imagine as the way to stir the passions.”<sup>2</sup> Hymn texts help us to grow taller and deeper—they build us up. A carefully-gathered collection of hymns, such as is available in a hymnal, makes sure we give attention to the entire range of the Christian story, from creation through every part of Christ’s life to the promised new creation. Since it has often been claimed that we believe what we sing (more than what we hear!), singing our faith is very important in faith-formation. “We are what we sing,” writes John Witvliet.<sup>3</sup>

*Hymns and Psalm-settings strengthen inter-generational worship.* Singing classics of the faith that have been “keepers” for decades and centuries enables the various generations within a congregation to sing together, strongly. Having a common core of songs that have been used over time and continue to be used across denominations allow grandparents and grandchildren to sing “in unison.”

Hymns and Psalm-settings connect us with the Church of all times. Each age of the Church has contributed rich and meaningful classics for the nurture and faith-expression of believers. Hymn classics bring insights uniquely developed and expressed from different periods of the long centuries of Christian worship: the longing and sense of mystery of the middle ages (“O Come, O Come Immanuel”), the sturdy faith statements of the Protestant Reformation (“A Mighty Fortress Is Our God”), the devotion of the 18th century revival in England (the Wesleys’ “O, For a Thousand Tongues to Sing”) and the United States (Isaac Watts’ “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross”). The words of hymn-writers from past times and other places provide us

with rich content for voicing our faith amid doubt, our praise amid distress, and our trust, expanding and deepening our range of expressions.<sup>4</sup>

*Hymns and Psalm-settings unite us across churches and denominations.* They strengthen our ability to worship through music in churches other than our own. Many of us have had the experience of attending a church service while on vacation or other travel and finding we do not know any of the songs (and if only the text without music is projected on the screen, we have difficulty singing at all). Just as having common creeds to recite, notably the Apostles Creed, unites us with all believers, so does having a common core of songs that are used in all denominations. This is entirely possible, for the song books of most denominations do share a rich core of songs. In addition to connecting us with the Church of all times, hymn classics connect us with the Church of our own time in all its denominations. All the songs listed above appear in the hymnals of the main denominations—Reformed, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Methodist, Mennonite, Episcopal, and Roman Catholic (yes, hymns of the Protestant Reformation are in the latest Catholic hymnal).

*Hymns and Psalms are set in a variety of fine musical styles which have stood the test of time.* Classic hymns and Psalm-settings employ well-shaped and sing-able tunes and rich harmony—the stuff of which durable music is formed.

In an effort to “stock” the singing repertoire of students and others with treasured, well-known hymns, Dordt College has compiled a list of fifty classic hymns to use and promote. Fifty is of course a small number; many times that number are worthy of our singing and are common to denominational songbooks. But, fifty was chosen as a “starter collection,” a manageable number of hymns that students could learn by the time they graduate. An article on the list and the rationale for it is available at:

<https://issuu.com/dordtcollege/docs/voice2014winterspringpost>

In addition to classic hymns, Psalm-settings are formative and expressive. The Book of Psalms is our first and primary songbook, providing the oldest songs of our faith. And, they are Biblical! They provide us unchanging and faith-full texts in a changing world,<sup>5</sup> speaking out of the heart and to the heart, crying out the deepest anxieties, worries, griefs, longings, joys, and thanksgivings of humankind. Some contemporary songs are Psalm-settings; for example, “Ten Thousand Reasons” is a setting of Psalm 103, and “On Eagle’s Wings” is an adaptation of Psalm 91. There are other musical styles for Psalms as well, and singing them can unite us with Christians of other times and places. A remarkable resource for singing the Psalms is *Psalms for All Seasons*,<sup>6</sup> a collection in which each of the 150 Psalms is set in multiple styles (traditional harmony, chant, Genevan settings, songs from Iona and Taize, African-American spirituals, and music of Asian, African, and South American origin), so that each worshipping body may be able to sing the Psalms in its preferred style—or in a variety of musical styles.

The introduction to this Psalter, subtitled “A Complete Psalter for Worship,” provides further insight into the riches of singing the Psalms.

“O, for a thousand tongues to sing!” wrote Charles Wesley. Such a desire should lead us to learn a wide, deep, and rich heritage of Psalm-settings and hymns—to sing with Christians in all denominations, to sing with all generations, and to sing by heart in our old age.

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## Footnotes

1. A personal note: knowing I have the same genes as my mother who was nearly blind in her later years, I am intentionally memorizing hymns and Psalms in preparation for the possibility of that handicap for myself. ↵
2. Kevin Twit” “My Grandmother Saved It, My Mother Threw It Away, and Now I’m Buying it Back. *Reformed Worship* 70 (December, 2003), pp. 30-31. ↵
3. John D. Witvliet: “We Are What We Sing,” *Reformed Worship* 60 (June, 2001), pp. 4-9. ↵
4. See Kevin Twit’s “My Grandmother Saved It, My Mother Threw It Away, and Now I’m Buying it Back” for an extensive discussion of the benefits of hymns and their appeal to younger generations, as well as a discussion of the formative value of hymns. *Reformed Worship*, 70 (December, 2003), pp. 30-31. ↵
5. Marty Haugen, “I’ve Got a Song for That,” *Reformed Worship* 96 (June, 2010), pp. 10-12. ↵
6. *Psalms for All Seasons*, ed, by Joyce Berger, Martin Tel, and John D, Witvliet. Grand Rapids: Calvin Institute for Christian Worship, Faith Alive Christian Resources, and Brazos Press, 2012 ↵