



This is My Song

Twelve Ideas for Using Hymns in Christian Formation

Within the pages of a hymnal one can find centuries of theological wisdom, spiritual insight, and practical guidance for faithful living. Here are twelve creative ideas and accessible strategies for using hymns, psalms, and spiritual songs in the church's ministry of education and formation for discipleship.

In the notes below, GTG = *Glory to God: The Presbyterian Hymnal* (WJKP, 2013)

1. Sing a Table Prayer.

Examples include:

- The Doxology (OLD HUNDREDTH): "Praise God, from Whom All Blessings Flow" (see GTG #606–609)
- The final stanza of many hymns (trinitarian doxology), e.g., "Now Thank We All Our God," GTG #643, stanza 3
- Selections from the thanksgiving and praise section of hymnals, e.g., "Give Thanks with a Grateful Heart," GTG #647 and "Lord, We Thank You for This Food," GTG #660
- Some selections from the Lord's Supper/Communion section, e.g., "Taste and See" (Psalm 34), GTG #520

2. Use Your Collective Memory.

Hymns help to connect us as the body of Christ. We hold them corporately and know them communally. We sing with and for others (not just our favorites!). Try filling in the blanks in a familiar hymn, e.g., "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing," GTG #475

Come, thou _____ of every blessing; tune my _____ to sing thy grace;
streams of _____, never ceasing, call for songs of _____ praise.
Teach me some melodious _____, sung by flaming tongues above;
praise the _____! I'm fixed upon it, mount of God's unchanging _____.

3. Sing and Pray Contemplatively.

- Use shorter songs (e.g., Taizé, Iona, global) and refrains
- Use selected words, phrases, or images from longer hymns
- Take a walk or go for a run with a phrase from a hymn
- Use the psalms (metrical, chanted, contemporary)
- Breath prayer: inhale/exhale, focusing on breathing while meditating on an appropriate line of a hymn. e.g., "Be Still and Know That I Am God," GTG #414

4. Get to Know a Hymn Writer.

Research biographical information. When and where do/did they live? What are/were their struggles and joys? Who are/were their contemporaries? What are/were their contributions? What kinds of hymns do/did they write, and why? e.g., William Cowper (1731–1800), English poet and hymn writer, author of "Sometimes a Light Surprises," GTG #800

5. **Dance or Sign a Hymn Text.** Make up simple movements, collaborate with a dancer in the congregation, or consult an American Sign Language (ASL) interpreter. e.g., “Change My Heart, O God,” GTG #695
6. **Lectio Divina with a Hymn**
 - Read or sing multiple times, using different readers or singers if possible
 - Watch and listen for God speaking to you in particular words, images, notes, or phrases
 - Offer those words/melodies to God in prayer, continuing to listen for God’s response
 - Carry them with you through the day, returning to them in times of contemplation

e.g. “Precious Lord, Take My Hand,” GTG #834
7. **Illuminate a Hymn Text.** Look at some medieval illuminated manuscripts for inspiration, especially of psalms or chants. Invite people to draw or color in the margins and around the words and music of a hymn. This is a great activity with children, but not just children. It can be a visual form of *Lectio Divina* (described above). e.g., “Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee,” GTG #611
8. **Study a Section of the Hymnal.** Look at a particular part of the biblical narrative (e.g., hymns about the Exodus). Read or sing through a season or festival in the Christian year (e.g., Holy Week). Study a theological theme or topic (e.g., forgiveness) by looking at hymns on the subject. Consider an aspect of Christian discipleship (e.g., stewardship) by studying relevant hymns. Learn a less familiar form of prayer (e.g., lament) by reading, praying, and singing related hymns, e.g. “How Long, O Lord?” GTG #777
9. **“Exegete” a Hymn Text.** Exegesis (from Greek for “draw out”) is the interpretation of a religious text, especially Scripture. Draw out deeper meaning from a hymn by examining biblical references, theological themes, ethical implications, and pastoral applications. e.g., “The Church’s One Foundation,” GTG #321
10. **Travel with a Hymn (Learn Context).** Learn where a particular hymn comes from and learn about the people who sing it. What are the religious and cultural practices of people in that place? What languages do they speak? With what Christian denominations or communions are they connected? Find out what other hymns or songs in your hymnal come from that place. If possible, get to know a person from that place or invite them to speak to your church, choir, or group. e.g., “Praise God, All You Nations,” GTG #326, a hymn from Ghana in West Africa
11. **Sing a Blessing.** Sing appropriate hymns or stanzas from hymns at the close of worship, Sunday school, or youth group; at home, before leaving for school or work; in the congregation, when members depart or students go away to college; and at the end of life. e.g., “May the Love of the Lord,” GTG #549
12. **Find Your Voice, Claim Your Song.** Choose a hymn of the week, month, or season. Study it, memorize it, pray and sing it. Offer it to the glory of God. As you do, consider these questions:
 - What difference does singing make in worship and in your life?
 - Are there certain hymns that are part of the “soundtrack” of your life?
 - Which hymn would be your theme song, and why?
 - Which hymns/songs do you most identify with, and why?
 - Which hymns/songs reflect who God is calling you to be?

Resources for Teaching about Hymns

- *Glory to God: The Presbyterian Hymnal* (WJK, 2013) see indexes (topical; lectionary; scriptural, psalms; authors, composers, and sources; tunes, meters; first lines and common titles) and commentary below hymns
- *Glory to God: A Companion*, Carl P. Daw Jr. (WJK, 2016)
- *Glory to God Online Hymnal* (pcusastore.com, click Presbyterian Hymnal, Access Online Hymnal): searchable by word, download hymn images
- “Making Music in the Meantime,” Presbyterian Association of Musicians (presbymusic.org, click Church Music and COVID: PAM’s Response)
- hymnary.org (Calvin College): ecumenical index of hymns and hymnals

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