



# Hymn writing workshops

- Tuesday 1st March 6.30-9pm;
- Tuesday 15th March 6.30-8pm

## Introduction to Session 1

We are heirs to a tradition of Christian song that stretches back nearly two thousand years: three thousand, if you count the Psalms in their own time. Amazingly, it is still a fresh, lively, living tradition – and we are going to become part of it!

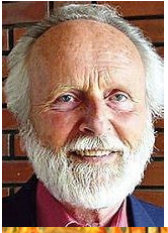
Hymns and Christian songs have often been written to mark special occasions, such as anniversaries. While the congregational tradition goes back to the radical reformation movements of the 16<sup>th</sup> century and beyond, the Congregational Federation was formed in 1972, fifty years ago this year.

We therefore have a **GOLDEN OPPORTUNITY** to create songs for God’s people. We hope you will have time to read through this handout before the first session. Listen for God’s Spirit speaking to you through the Bible, through your experience of our fellowship in the last 50 years, and through the hymn/songs that are closest to your heart.

God’s Spirit also awakens skills and gifts in us, and we will be looking at techniques that help us craft our ideas into hymns and songs that will enrich and inspire worship



## Read some hymns



One way of starting your hymn writing journey is to look at hymns you already sing and admire. What draws you to them? Have you noticed that hymns often end with some kind of resolution – **a hope for the future, or even an open question**. Fred Kaan is a writer who challenges singers to take their beliefs out into their everyday lives. Look particularly at *Now let us from this table rise*. Another theme which could shape your hymns is that of **calling or being called**. Samuel was at first confused by hearing the voice of God, but eventually comes to say “Speak, Lord. I am your servant and I am listening” (1 Sam 3:10). What does being called look like to you and your singers? Janet Lees’s *Loving shepherd of your sheep* considers this thought in an imaginative and creative way. Further questions arise when we consider what Jesus (or God) is asking of us. Hymns are an effective tool for **challenging our actions and informing our thoughts** as we move through our days. Think about those sleeping disciples and Jesus rebuking them “Couldn’t you watch with me even one hour?” (Matthew 26:40). Marjorie Dobson asks this question in

her hymn *Jesus in the garden weeping*. The hymn ends by asking for forgiveness as we celebrate Easter. Your hymn could offer both reasons for negligence and an aspiration to do better in the future.

Before starting to write, it might be worth considering who you are writing for. Writing for yourself calls for a personal response. If you are writing for the congregation, you might be considering a particular gap in available hymns. If you are writing for children, you might like to consider particular images and vocabulary to make your hymns accessible to these younger singers.

## Read the Signs of the Times

It will not have escaped your notice that our hymn-writing journey starts at the beginning of Lent. Hymns are very often written in response to the liturgical seasons. As we enter the season of lent, we find ourselves in what is traditionally a time of reflection. This season may present ideas and images to fire the imagination.

The season of Lent presents a wide range of subjects, events and emotions all of which can feed into hymn writing. All of these themes can be expanded from the specific to a wider context. I’ve included a well-known hymn as an example of each. One starting point could be to look at these hymns and ask what you do, or do not, like about each. How can you respond in your own way? All of these things remain relevant in our Christian lives and can inform hymns which are not specifically about Lent or Easter.

- The prospect of depriving ourselves of something (40 days and 40 nights)
- Mothering Sunday and the coming of spring (Now the green blade riseth)
- Passion Sunday (O sacred head! sore wounded, defiled)
- Palm Sunday with celebration (All glory, laud and honour)

- Maundy Thursday and the Last Supper - also foot washing (An upper room did our Lord prepare)
- Good Friday - darkness and walk of witness (There is a green hill far away)
- Holy Saturday - waiting (His cross stands empty in a world grown silent)
- Easter Sunday - resurrection joy (The strife is o'er, the battle done).

## Read the Bible

The Bible is full of inspiration for hymns and songs used in worship. There is lots of rich poetic imagery, some deeply challenging rhetoric, and a wealth of dramatic, powerful narrative.

When Janet Wootton was visiting churches a couple of years ago as President, she asked people what it meant to be congregational Christians. There were some amazing answers. Our churches do know why they are congregational, and many are genuinely enthusiastic about the ideal. It has to do with God's Spirit at work in every person; being Christ-centred; no hierarchies; every voice is worth hearing, because each one may be speaking God's words. That is something to celebrate in hymns and songs.

So here are a couple of Bible passages that might provide inspiration for the Congregational Federation's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

The first is from Exodus chapters 25, 31 and 35-6, and describes the building of the Tabernacle, the place where the Israelites met with God while they were in the wilderness. It was designed to be rich and beautiful, a wonderful place to encounter God; and mobile, so that it could travel with the people towards the Promised Land. But above all, it came from, and belonged to *all the people*. Read Exodus 25:1-9 and let the sights, scents and touch of all the beautiful gifts, brought by all God's People, fill your senses. 31:1-6 describes the skills and crafts given by God's Spirit to enable the work to be done. The gifts of God's people are met by the gifts of the Spirit.

Chapter 35 revisits the construction following Aaron's disastrous attempts at idol worship, but here the language is even richer and more inclusive. Now women as well as men are explicitly included in those who bring gifts, and those who are gifted. And – get this! – the giving has to stop, because there is already more than enough (36:5-7).

How could you use the ideas, the excitement and the splendour of a passage like this in a hymn or song for the life of God's people? Not slavishly, verse by verse, but releasing the richness, the diversity of gifts, the sense of over-abundance, and inclusivity, in the heart of the worshipping community as it travels towards the promises of God?

The other passage is far shorter: 1 Peter 2:4-10. Here the writer is using words and images from earlier biblical writings to interpret the life of God's People in New Testament days. The central image is again a building for worship, but this time the people are themselves part of the construction, living stones – what a brilliant conception! – built on the Foundation Stone (Isaiah 28:16 – look at the way it is used there), the Living Stone, which is

Jesus himself. Verses 9-10 create a cascade of images for God's People, pouring out of the fountain which is the ancient biblical texts. The early church had to ask itself, just as we do in our own time, what does it mean to be God's People? Here is phrase after glorious phrase, not invented on the spot, but rooted in the long life-experience of God's People in all kinds of circumstances.

Don't feel that you have to draw on these passages specifically, but I hope they offer some guidance and inspiration for ways in which the Spirit-filled ideal of congregational Christianity finds its roots in some of the most spectacular biblical ground.

## Rhythm, Rhyme and Reason

Imagine the scene: a great congregation, their voices raised in singing God's praises, well-crafted, inspiring words, sung to a tune full of power, that carries the words deep into people's hearts. It is one of the most amazing experiences in Christian life.

The craft of the hymn-writer is to make sure that the meaning of the words is enhanced by the gifts of poetry and music that a congregation can grasp at first sight, but will grow in inspiration and understanding if they sing it regularly over a lifetime. I am sure that you can all think of hymns or songs that achieve this. If so, note one or two now, and, when you have finished reading this handout (!) look up the hymns that have inspired you for a lifetime.

I am going to look at three hymns in the session, including the one examined below. These will be chosen for their familiarity, and the different ways they deal with rhythm, rhyme and reason.

### **Morning has broken**

*Rhyme:* Look at where the lines rhyme. It is deceptively complex for a very simple hymn:

Each verse has 8 lines, in two 4 line sections. The first and third line of each section has a rhyme.

### **Broken/spoken**

### **Singing/springing**

Then there is another rhyme, which ties the two sections of each verse together:

### **Bird/Word**

Most hymns only rhyme one syllable, like 'bird/Word' here, but this hymn also uses two syllable rhymes, not only 'broken/spoken' but 'new fall/dewfall', 'sweetness/(com)pleteness'. The rhyme scheme is consistent through all three verses, and seems effortless. There is no twisting of words to achieve a rhyme. This makes the song very singable, even playful to sing.

*Rhythm:* the tune, BUNESSAN, is as singable as the words. You don't expect a very serious or challenging hymn to this tune, but 'Morning has broken' with its light joy and praise, fits it perfectly. The tune helps to carry the parallel between the present delightful morning, and the first dawn of creation. Look through the words to find those parallels in meaning, and see how the gentle flow of the tune helps them along.

But there is more: have a look at the ends of the lines. Some end with a punctuation mark: 'Praise for the singing,/Praise for the morning;', so the singer pauses at the end of the line. But some have no punctuation, and are intended to extend without a pause into the next line: 'Praise for them, springing fresh from the Word'.

Then, the way the words sound with the music is important. The English language stresses some words, but leaves others unstressed. Lots of hymns have 'false stresses', but this one manages *almost* without any of these. Have a look at the two times 'Of' appears at the beginning of the line, and see what you think. Other than those, the words flow in the natural rhythms of the English language.

*Reason:* Lastly, the sound of the words, and the way they carry the message of the song, are important. English has some lovely sound combinations at the beginning of words, so that they burst into the singer's mouth. 'Praise' is a lovely word, starting with the explosion of 'Pr' and spreading out into a big long vowel 'ai'. Say the word now, and see what it does to your facial expression. Meaning and sound combine very well. Other words in this hymn like this are: 'Fresh', and 'Sprung'.

This hymn uses some great combinations of words and ideas. We know already that this is a hymn about a sunlit morning, which reflects the glory of the first morning. By the time we arrive at the last verse, we have the language of fresh, bright, dewy morning in our minds. Then the last verse brings the singer right into the image. Try saying (or singing) the first four lines of the last verse, and see what happens to your face and expression. All those open vowels 'mine, sunlight, one light (another of those double syllable rhymes)', then it's back to 'Praise', which flows from this one morning into every morning of our lives.

I have mentioned the tune, BUNESSAN, which has become very popular. Most writers of hymn words find it useful to have a tune in mind. This helps you to keep the rhymes in the right places and the rhythm consistent. It also helps the 'feel' of the verses to work with the tune. Many composers find it hard to write a tune if a hymn has deep inconsistencies between the verses.

Of course, you may be a tune-writer yourself, or write words and music as a single item. If so, please feel free to use this opportunity to send a musical score or recording as well as your hymn/song text.

When we are writing hymns or songs for congregations to sing, we have a duty and delight to create the best possible singing experience that we can. God's praise, or challenge, deserves the best. This hymn has become so popular that, even in our secular age, when people no longer know what Easter is all about, a popular coffee chain could advertise: 'When morning has broken, we will fix it' – and expect people to understand the reference.

### What next?

At the end of this first session, we will invite you to *get writing!!* We have a fortnight till our next session, on March 15<sup>th</sup>. Between now and then, please feel free to work with others, if you want to; or to send your words and/or music to one of the team who have put these workshops together.

*More details will be available at  
WORKSHOP 1*

