



## Worship Formation & Liturgical Resources: Frequently Asked Questions

### Did Martin Luther really use tavern tunes in church?

*The worship staff receives a number of similar inquiries on worship-related topics from across the church.*

*These responses should not be considered the final word on the topic, but useful guides that are to be considered in respect to local context with pastoral sensitivity.*

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It has been claimed by many people over the years that Martin Luther boldly seized songs commonly sung in taverns, changed the lyrics and then made them the basis of congregational song. In the interest of historical accuracy, in fairness to the reformer, and for the purpose of conversation about worship music today, this claim must be challenged, or at least be carefully qualified. At its worst this claim is a misrepresentation of fact. At its best, it is a misleading oversimplification of Luther's intention and his practice of liturgical music.

Comparing the music situation of Luther's time with our own is like comparing apples with oranges. At the time of Luther, there were not sharp distinctions between secular and sacred musical styles. When we speak today of "popular music," we mean it in a way not familiar to sixteenth-century Germany. (For more on German hymnody, see *Hymnal Companion to the Lutheran Book of Worship* in Resources)

Did Luther borrow melodies not normally used in worship for congregational song? Yes, definitely. There were, in fact, four sources of melodies used for congregational hymnody in the churches that followed Luther's reforms early in the sixteenth century.

- Many popular hymn tunes were already in existence. Prior to Luther's reforms, these tunes were not sung at Mass but during religious pilgrimages and other devotions outside the liturgy. They were taken over by the reformers for use in the liturgy with little or no change. "O Lord, We Praise You" (ELW 499) is an example of this kind of hymn.
- The reformers made use of the chant melodies that were sung by choirs in worship. Originally sung in Latin, the texts sung with these tunes were translated into German and modified to make them easier for a congregation of untrained singers. "Come, Holy Ghost, Our Souls Inspire" (chant version at ELW 577; chorale version at 588) is an example of this.
- The art of creating simple melodies that could be used for congregational song was widely encouraged. Luther's own "A Mighty Fortress" (ELW 503-505) is a fine example.

- There were indeed instances in which Luther and his colleagues used melodies (and sometimes part of the poetry) from non-liturgical songs. The first stanza of "From Heav'n Above" (ELW 268) was based upon a light-hearted love song, "From Distant Land I Come To You." Originally the hymn text was sung to the love song tune. Since this tune was still being sung in taverns and other places for entertainment, it was not long before the reformers substituted a newly composed melody for the original. It is this new melody that survives as the standard tune to this day.

So, using Luther as a model, is it appropriate today to use music with secular roots with sacred lyrics for congregational song in worship? Let's consider several points.

- The music for entertainment and diversion during Luther's time was corporate song; i.e. people singing together. This music was intended to be sung by a group of people, perhaps gathered around a lute or harpsichord at the table or at the bar. Such music is radically different from music performed by a soloist or band with groups of people passively listening. Musical leaders need to expect the assembly to sing by giving them songs that are intended for group singing and that are led appropriately. Such songs will have melodies and rhythms that are accessible.
- Luther used the music at hand but always transformed it into something new for use in worship. A similar thing happened with the German language as he translated the Bible. Luther literally created a new German to adequately translate the Scriptures. Scripture had an effect on the language, just as the language affected Scripture. A similar transformation occurred with music. As tunes were borrowed from the culture for use in public worship, they were molded into something brand new.
- Immediately following the German Reformation, many new hymn texts were being written, but there were few hymn tunes on which to draw. Luther lamented over the dearth of available tunes for use by congregations in worship. That situation does not exist today.
- The historic example of the hymn tune *Von Himmel Hoch* with text "From Heav'n Above" (for which the original tune was replaced with a new one because of the tune's connections with non-sacred activity) shows that the association a particular tune carried with it affected its use in worship. Certainly many tunes that were originally coupled with secular texts have found their way into the canon of Christian hymnody. The tune *The Ash Grove* (ELW 547 & 881) is a Welsh folk melody but holds few secular connotations for most Americans. The tune is now more closely associated with the texts found in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* than the original secular text. Therefore, the associations connected with this tune are not as problematic as they would be by writing sacred words to a tune like "Jingle Bells," for example. Frank Burch Brown treats this subject, giving an example of Psalm 23 paired with "Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer." See Resources for information on this article.
- The lack of sophisticated printing or recording technology in Luther's day meant that any song worthy of copying by hand or learning by aural repetition was going to last. With today's technology, it is impossible for most congregations to stay completely contemporary. The popular music of our day simply changes too quickly. In addition, the hymns and songs that have staying power in one

assembly may not have such power in another. Context and quality are at least two factors in a hymn's longevity. We also are wise to consider service music composed for specific occasions or liturgical seasons. It may be of high quality, but it is not composed with the intention of being sung for decades or centuries. As with many aspects in worship, an eye toward balance is key. Balancing the quality hymns that will connect the generations and those pieces that may or may not endure but serve the liturgy in our own time.

The challenge for us is to break open the musical idioms and ideas of our day to discover melodies, harmonies, rhythms, and instrumentation that can be transformed for use in worship. We must not forget our past. We need continually to rediscover the treasures of our heritage for use today. However, we must never allow our congregations to become museums masquerading as worshipping communities by failing to challenge our worshipers with new melodies. Music of all kinds holds potential for use in worship, but rarely is developing new hymnody as easy as merely substituting one set of words for another.

## RESOURCES

### [Resources Available for Download on the ELCA Website:](#)

- 📄 Collins, Dori Erwin and Scott C. Weidler. *Sound Decisions: Evaluating Contemporary Music for Lutheran Worship*. Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Division for Congregational Ministries.

### [Resources Available from Augsburg Fortress:](#)

- 📖 Westermeyer, Paul. *Hymnal Companion to Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2010.

### Other Resources

- 📖 Schalk, Carl. "German Hymnody" in [Hymnal Companion to Lutheran Book of Worship](#) by Marilyn Kay Stulken. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981.
- 📄 Brown, Frank Burch. "[Worship Mismatch](#)." *Christian Century* 126, no.5 (March 10, 2009). (Note: The full article on this site is available to subscribers only.)

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