Creating Official Methodist Hymnals

by Nolan B. Harmon

Methodists have always been noted for their singing, and from the time of Wesley to the present the Church has produced its own official hymnal—sometimes hymnals. These books, when adopted by the respective General Conferences of the various Methodist bodies, become "official" as the hymnic voice of the Church. It is admitted, of course, that Methodist people are free to sing any song they please, but because of the official character of the Book of Hymns, as a recent General Conference said that our present book may be called, the utmost care and attention is given to every proposal for hymnal revision. There are some who contend that the hymnal should be revised every twenty-five or thirty years in order to keep abreast of the living Church.

As one who served on the last two Methodist Hymnal Commissions, that of 1930-34 and 1960-64, I had some unforgettable experiences, and I propose to cite some of them here. I first served on what was called "the joint hymnal commission" of 1930, and we of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, were directed to join with like commissioners of the Methodist Episcopal Church to revise the hymnal which both Episcopal Methodisms had compiled in 1905 and had been using ever since.

The hymnbook of 1905 represented a cooperative move of high import between the then divided Methodisms and became a decided help toward what was to be their eventual union in 1939. There was at that date much antipathy toward any idea of unification, as Bishop John M. Moore makes clear in his book, The Long Road to Methodist Union. However, by the turn of the century the two churches felt that at least they could sing together the same Methodist hymns, and the respective General Conferences each nominated "hymnal commissioners" who worked together to produce The Methodist Hymnal, copyrighted in 1905. "This hymnal was the best hymnal either church had ever had," declared Bishop Moore. "It carried a common Order of Worship which had been intelligently prepared. These [the hymn book and the Order of Worship] were two bonds of unity that promoted the cause of union."
Moore was right about it promoting union, but many older Methodists had difficulty in accepting the *Gloria Patri* in the Order of Worship; the Apostles' Creed always to be repeated; and especially the *Amen* at the end of each hymn. "Formalism of the worst sort" complained some of the older, untrammeled Methodists. On my first circuit out in Maryland a good steward named Calvin Bready told me that he had always sung in the choir as a young man, "until they put the *Amen* after each hymn, and then I quit—quit for good." I wonder what Brother Cal would say today to all the new liturgical novelties which have been inserted since his time.

The Southern Church named to the joint commission of 1930 four able men who had served on the 1905 commission: Wilbur Fisk Tillett, dean of the Vanderbilt School of Religion and an able authority in the entire field of hymnody; John M. Moore, who had been elected a bishop in 1918; Fitzgerald Parker, editor of *The Epworth Era*; and Henry N. Snyder, president of Wofford College.

The Northern Church did not name any of the 1905 commissioners on the 1930 group, but they did put on the commission some very able men. These included Bishop Edwin H. Hughes, whose understanding, tact and goodwill floated the sessions over many a tangled situation. John W. Langdale, Book Editor of the Methodist Episcopal Church, was elected secretary of the joint commission; Oscar Thomas Olson, then pastor of Mt. Vernon Church in Baltimore and a noted communion liturgist; Earl Enyeart Harper, a hymnist and choral leader of growing influence; and James R. Houghton, the well known teacher and director of musical activities at Boston University.

The preface of the completed hymnal says of its membership:

The General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church of 1928 appointed a Commission on the Revision of the HYMNAL and PSALTER, consisting of five Bishops, five ministers, and five laymen. The Bishops were: William F. Anderson, Edwin Holt Hughes, Frederick D. Leete, H. Lester Smith, and Titus Lowe; the ministers: Henry Hitt Crane, Joseph M. M. Gray, Earl Enyeart Harper, John W. Langdale, and Oscar Thomas Olson; the laymen: Karl P. Harrington, James R. Houghton, Howard Wilder Lyman, Robert G. McCutchan, and Albert Riemenschneider.

The General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, of 1930, appointed a similar Commission. The Bishops were:
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Joining these commissioners after their work had well begun were official representatives appointed by the Methodist Protestant Church. These came at the invitation of the Joint Commission itself. The writer claims some credit for this, since I was at that time editor of my conference paper, *The Baltimore Southern Methodist*, and occupied offices in the Methodist Protestant headquarters building at 516 North Charles Street. I came to appreciate the Methodist Protestant leaders, and when they asked if it would not be possible for them to join in the creation of the new Methodist hymnal, I promised that I would write to Bishop Candler, the chairman of our Southern commission. He in turn communicated with Bishop William F. Anderson, chairman of the Northern commission, and they agreed that the Methodist Protestant Church be invited to send commissioners to join with us. Both knew that neither General Conference had authorized such a move, but they also felt that since union negotiations had been progressing well, there would be no objection to including the Methodist Protestant representatives. In fact, everyone applauded this move. Then the Methodist Protestants (for all their emphasis on "laity rights") appointed six ministers to represent them. These proved to be exceedingly talented men: John C. Broomfield, president of the Methodist Protestant General Conference and later bishop of The Methodist Church; Hugh Latimer Elderdice; Harlan Luther Feeman; Charles Edward Forlines; J. W. Hawley and Eugene C. Makosky.

The first meeting of the Joint Commission of 1930 was held in Washington. All of the commissioners were extremely conscious of the divided churches and were so anxious to appear brotherly that they refrained from saying anything that would appear of a sectional or personal nature. Proximity to organic union was recognized, and particularly the younger members wanted nothing to hinder that consummation. Consequently the commissioners were so polite and moved so gingerly that they got nowhere. Gradually this feeling was overcome and revision moved forward. Happily there never appeared the slightest division between the northern and southern groups either over hymns or procedure.
Many heated debates involved the whole commission, but never along the line of a sectional cleavage.

Bishop Anderson, chairman of the Northern commission, presided at the first morning session, and when we came back in the afternoon he asked Bishop Candler to preside for the rest of the day. “Oh, no, Bishop Anderson,” replied Candler, “you go on and preside.” Whereupon Anderson said, “No, Bishop Candler, I beg you to take the chair.” This continued two or three more times until Bishop John M. Moore interrupted and said, “While you two are going on with your Alphonse and Gaston act, I nominate Bishop Hughes to preside.” “Oh, well,” said Candler, “I’ll just take the cheer myself,” which he did for the rest of the day.

As the group was about to adjourn that evening, Bishop Hughes suddenly said, “Professor Harrington, go to the piano and play your Christmas song for our evening devotions.” I remember how astonished I was that one who had written a priceless hymn was among us, for I thought that “There’s a song in the air, there’s a star in the sky” had come down to us almost out of Bethlehem itself. Also it was about as hot a summer night as pre-airconditioned Washington could get, and Christmas seemed far away, but Harrington played “While the beautiful sing, for the manger of Bethlehem cradles a king,” and we adjourned. Harrington himself was a pure classicist, teaching Latin and Greek at Wesleyan in Connecticut, and he could be depended on, with Dr. Tillett, to defend any hymn of the classic past.

The inimitable Candler broke the ice in another way in a subsequent early meeting of the commission. The practice in both the 1930 and 1960 commissions was to go through the book to be revised, hymn by hymn, and decide on which should be retained and discarded. Those reported as seldom used, unfamiliar, or just plain no good, were always voted out to make room for new or better hymns. In the 1905 book there was a hymn which ended every stanza with the line, “The Lord will provide.” I had never heard the song, nobody else seemed to know it, and a motion was made to strike it. Bishop Candler broke in, “Well, we used to sing that hymn down in Georgia all the time after General Sherman had marched by our place.” The northern men looked quickly to see how much in earnest he was, caught the twinkle in his eye, and a big laugh followed. “He was a good soldier but keerless with fire,” added the Bishop in the merriment. This did not save the hymn, and Bishop Candler didn’t really contend for it.
Henry Hitt Crane and I had an exchange in one of the early meetings, neither of us having had a chance to know each other beforehand. I was defending the hymn, "The Rock That Is Higher Than I," against a move to delete, when Crane broke in aggressively and asked me "how I got that way." I responded, "Anybody who will take up for 'I'm Going Home to Die No More' needn't talk," for Crane had made a plea for that hymn, saying that it had been used at his father's funeral and he wanted it kept. I never did like it, perhaps because I remembered our southern congregations singing, "To dynamo—to dynamo!" Fitzgerald Parker also argued against "The Rock That Is Higher Than I," saying that it "was a peripatetic rock, which cast its shadow whether 'climbing the mountain way steep, or walking the shadowy vale.' " But we kept it in.

Parker and Crane, who were at opposite poles temperamentally—one dynamic, up-and-coming, exuding vim and vitality; the other scholarly, pedantic, a New Orleans gentleman—these two men got together in an attack on "Sweet Hour of Prayer." Crane said, "Why, it's silly, it's sentimental, it's—" "Dr. Crane," cut in Parker, "it apotheosizes death!" "Apotheosize!" yelled Crane. "That's the word I'm looking for. Let me sit down by this Parker man."

Walter Greene saw a chance to tell a story about this hymn to the effect that Methodist people had begun to complain about the lessening influence of the prayer meeting, even in horse and buggy days; that this had worsened in the automobile era, but that now in the airplane age, "They shout while passing through the air, farewell, farewell, sweet hour of prayer." This drew a laugh, but Bishop Hughes moved in. "Now, get hold of yourselves, brethren. You can't take "Sweet Hour of Prayer" out of a Methodist hymnal." And that ended the opposition.

A guiding principle in both commissions was that a hymn should be good and helpful qua hymn, not because some pressure group or influential person wanted it in, or out. Henry Van Dyke's hymn, "Joyful, joyful, we adore Thee," was objected to by Bishops Leete and Darlington because just at that time Van Dyke had come out in a much publicized attack on Prohibition. Whereupon Oscar Olson said, "Brethren, we can't go into the character or actions of every hymn's author. The question simply is, 'Is this a good hymn?' I say it is." The commission said so strongly, and always used that judgment as its measure. So
Hosmer, the Unitarian ("O Thou in all thy might so far, in all thy love so near") and of all people, Jean Jacques Rousseau, have their contributions in the book.

The principle of usefulness applied reversely when Dr. Tillett made a strong plea for keeping in "Dies Irae"—Day of Wrath, O Dreadful Day. He said that this was one of the very earliest Christian hymns and that Dean Arthur P. Stanley's translation of it was classic—as indeed it is. "That may be," put in J. M. M. Gray, "but is this book going to be a museum for the preservation of Christian antiquities, or is it to be a usable hymnbook? Who sings the 'Dies Irae' anywhere today?" Apparently nobody, and out it went. And I doubt that anyone in the church has missed it at all in these last forty and more years.

The 1960 Commission invoked much the same principle to exclude three hymns which were greatly favored in 1930. These were Sidney Lanier's "Into the Woods My Master Went"; Rudyard Kipling's "Recessional"; and Tennyson's "Crossing the Bar." The musicians insisted that these were poems, not hymns, and very difficult for congregational singing. They suggested that they might be made available for solo offerings, but not left in the hymnal. I, with the minority, fought hard for these hymns—as I am going to keep calling them—and it was my impression that after we lost it was agreed that they might be printed in the back of the hymnal for whoever wanted to read or use them as poetry. But when the 1960-64 book came out—well, they are not in it, anywhere.

The "Recessional" was bitterly objected to by the black members of the 1960 Commission. They said that the line "lesser breeds without the law" was considered an affront to their people. In vain did we explain that Kipling was using this expression simply as pretended irony against a pharisaical sort of high-churchism that had nothing to do with race. But our black commissioners insisted that if we kept the "Recessional" there would be widespread resentment among all black Methodists.

"Publish it with that line left out," someone suggested. "Then everyone will want to know why the line was omitted, and there will be a bigger question than ever," was the reply. "I move we leave it out entirely then," said another. So moved, so done. Thus the Captains and the Kings depart—from the Methodist hymnal anyway.

With regard to Lanier's beautiful "Into the Woods My Master
Went,” we were told that in the 1905 Commission, all that Bishop E. E. Hoss ever wanted—and got—was the insertion of that as a hymn. But in 1930, another southern bishop, Warren A. Candler, who had not been on the 1905 Commission, violently objected to keeping it. “I knew Sidney Lanier,” he said. “Liked him! But that’s a poem, not a hymn, and it doesn’t belong in the hymnal.” He was overwhelmingly outvoted and the hymn kept in. Whereupon he commented goodnaturedly, “I just don’t believe it’s in the Bible about all those little leaves jumping around and squirrels talking.” He would have rejoiced to see our 1960 group, led by Jim Houghton, take it out.

Another principle followed by both commissions was to give every large and respectable body of Methodists the hymns they particularly wanted, even if the rest of us had our doubts. If a plea was made as coming from another part of the nation—as New England or the Far West—for a hymn not well known or rarely used elsewhere, that hymn was kept in. But any sectional or class plea for a hymn had to be supported by more than one commissioner’s voice to become effective. I recall that in the 1930 Commission a man from Texas wanted us to retain a hymn that none of the rest ever used, saying that it “was very popular in Texas.” But Bishop John M. Moore, who was a Texan of the Texans, said, “Why, we never heard of it in our part of Texas!” And that was the coup de grace for that.

Matters of taste influenced everyone, and often instead of trying to produce a strong argument, we forsook reason and let our emotions take over. “I like it,” one would say, to be met with a “Well, I don’t!” Then we would vote, the majority siding with one or the other. De gustibus non disputandum—you cannot question another person’s taste. Those who like Bach do not, as a rule, like “The Little Brown Church in the Wildwood” or “The Old Rugged Cross.” The lay people largely did, strongly.

In fact all the so-called Gospel Hymns were greatly fought over, and I believe that the best of these were kept or put in. James Houghton said that he thought the hymn, “How Great Thou Art,” is the best of the recent gospel hymns. It took some finagling to get the copyright for the words we use, although the Swedish tune is in the public domain. Dr. Houghton, however, fought strongly against including the Londonderry air for “Above the Hills of Time the Cross Is Gleaming,” when this went into the 1930 book. He said that everyone would think of “Danny Boy” and “tender
apple blossoms” when this air was used. “Why, Jim,” Bishop Hughes said, “we are going to make a Christian hymn of this, just as we have taken some old beer-hall tunes and use them mightily in our worship.” Houghton lost then, but thirty years afterward, backed by the musicians on the 1960 Commission, he got the Londonderry air out, though Bishop Marvin Franklin spoke strongly for it. I was greatly on the losing side in this.

In the important matter of selecting new hymns, the hymn books of other churches—especially those which had been published within recent years or since our last revision—were closely examined. Our own past hymnals were scanned for hymns which had once proved of value and might again. For the 1964 book the hymnal of the Evangelical United Brethren Church was checked carefully to see if it had hymns which we did not have and which the E.U.B. people (who were at the point of joining with us to become The United Methodist Church) felt should be kept. It turned out that there were few which we did not already have. Meanwhile, able representatives of the E.U.B. Church sat with us and participated in making selections for the present book.

The search for new and unpublished hymns brought a flood of offerings. Most of these were seen at once to be of little value. In fact, to compose a Christian hymn worthy to take its place in the rich inheritance we have proves a challenge that few in any generation are able to meet. Drs. Tillett and Harper said that they checked over 8,000 manuscripts offered for the 1930 Commission. Of these they presented about sixty to the full commission, and a very few were finally chosen.

The same thing happened in 1960. So-called “hymns” were sent in by all sorts of people, sometimes from ransacked old trunks containing the naive “poetry” of pious and departed loved ones. I remember one that began “Day is rising in the east, Heaven is making earth a feast.” Occasionally something good would come from competent living writers, especially in some field where there was need for specialized hymns such as church anniversaries, cornerstone laying, or Christian education. Bishop Costen J. Harrell, out of his own experience in dedicating churches, saw the need along this line and sent his “Eternal God and Sovereign Lord” (now number 351), which has proved most acceptable.

Certain members of the commission tried their hand at hymn writing, though Oscar Olson told me that he had submitted an offering or two under an assumed name so that there would be no
embarrassment if his material should be turned down—as it was. Dr. Tillett, whose magnificent “O Son of God Incarnate” has earned a place in universal Christian hymnody, submitted two or three other hymns under his own name. These did not impress the commission at all, though there was a natural hesitancy in telling him so. Finally Bishop Moore was persuaded to ask Dr. Tillett in open session to withdraw the later offerings or he would really “hurt his well deserved reputation should they be published.” Tillett withdrew them, but he privately complained to me that Bishop Moore had forced him to recall what he really thought were good hymns.

The best of all the unpublished hymns were mimeographed and then carefully read over and evaluated in open meeting. Sometimes one was provisionally adopted, “if a suitable tune can be found for it.” Sometimes the tune committee would want a certain tune put in “if words can be found to go with it.” That was the case with the present hymn 490 whose tune came from the Chinese Methodists. The text for it was apparently a secondary consideration, though Bliss Wiant managed both harmony and translation and earned the thanks of the commission.

I have been asked what differences I noted between the two commissions. The first was undoubtedly more colorful, with more decided characters than in the 1960 group. The latter was in reality the standing Commission on Worship of The Methodist Church, the days of a divided Methodism happily gone. The General Conference of 1960 committed the revision to this existing body, suggesting that there be added to it the Publishing Agent, Book Editor, and certain other church officers as well as hymnists, musicians, and other helpers whom the Commission might co-opt.

What the 1960 group lacked in color, it made up in smooth efficiency. Its members knew their business and went at it with swift, sure moves. There was little of the palavering along the way that the 1930 group saw. It had a committee on texts, of which I was chairman; one on tunes, with Austin Lovelace as chairman; a committee on executive-editorial work, Earl Harper, chairman; and one on the Psalter and Ritual, Will Hildebrand, chairman. Practical hymnists from the seminaries and publishing world were brought in from time to time.

One matter of importance that I noted was that the 1960 Commission manifested more theological ability, certainly more theological unanimity, than was true in 1930. That was a time along
toward the end of what is sometimes called today "old-fashioned liberalism." This showed itself in ways that I did not then understand as well as I do now. I recall particularly that Charles Wesley's hymn to the Second Advent, "Now He Comes on Clouds Descending," was voted out in spite of my and Fitzgerald Parker's argument that the New Testament does teach that the Lord will come again—as does the Creed. I remember saying that we did not have a single hymn in the whole book which definitely said so. To no avail. J. M. M. Gray declared that the last verse which had "JAH, Jehovah, Everlasting God come down," was the invocation of "an old Hebrew God, and doesn't belong with us." So for thirty years Methodist churches had no hymn anticipating the Lord's return. Then when we got "Lo, he comes with clouds descending" put back in the present hymnal, it was mistakenly placed, I think, in the regular Christmas Advent section of the book. It certainly belongs in the book, but "Deeply wailing, shall the true Messiah see" does not go with "Joy to the World" or "There's a Song in the Air." I have been told, however, that in the British Methodist hymnal this hymn has been kept in the regular Advent section.

Another difference between the two commissions lay in the fact that the earlier group felt free to alter the words of a hymn—even a revered Wesley hymn—when they thought that the language was too archaic or incongruous for modern taste. The 1960 Commission decided that the 1930 body had gone too far in this "editing" of the writings of the past and voted to put the author's original words back when this could acceptably be done. It is perfectly clear that to change the words of a hymn or poem to make it say something that the author did not say, and yet keep the author's name over it, would incur his or her wrath if they were alive to protest.

Charles Wesley, for instance, in "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling" did not write "let us find that promised rest." He wrote, "Let us find that second rest"—meaning Christian perfection or the Second Blessing. But the second blessing idea was a little too much for the 1930 commissioners, and they changed it to "promised rest." The 1964 Commission put back Wesley's "second rest," as they should have done, though by this time the Baptists and other Christian groups who like this hymn have put "promised rest" in their editions of it.

In 1930, "From all the dark places of earth's heathen races" became earth's "needy races," since all the old-line missionary
churches had to go easy on the word *heathen*, and such expressions were deleted as the colonial churches grew in strength. Walter Greene objected to the line in this hymn, “His beauty shall enter them in,” saying it was not good English. Then in 1960 the Board of Missions in New York—probably some little office cabal of their’s—sent word that they did not care much for this hymn and to let it go. So we dropped it, though many of us remembered it as a rousing missionary hymn, heathen races, dark places, and all.

As to backfire from foreign lands, there is the story of the English hymn revisers who caught the anger of the Ceylonese with the reference to “Spicy breezes blowing soft o’er Ceylon’s Isle. . . . where only man is vile.” Some Britisher, wishing to keep the Heber hymn, moved that “Ceylon” be changed to “Java” and “let the Dutch worry about it.”

In the hymn “Alas and Did My Saviour Bleed” there was a line, “for such a worm as I.” In 1930 that became “for sinners such as I.” “With ashes who would deign to part when called on angels’ bread to feast” was omitted as too strong an expression, our Methodist ears by that time having gotten too nice for the robust expressions of our ancestors.

But the question remains: Do we have any right to change the language of a hymn writer—and leave the author’s name over it—when that person is not alive to defend the original wording? I am thinking of Whittier, the Quaker, who in his Society’s bent for quietness, wrote “Dear Lord and Father of Mankind, forgive our feverish ways.” He did not write “foolish ways” as we have made it, though heaven knows we need to be saved from foolishness as well as from the feverish race of modern life.

A strong attack was made in the 1930 meetings on “There Is a Fountain Filled with Blood,” which attack I thought was motivated by aesthetics rather than theology. Bishop Hughes defended it against Houghton and others, and there did not seem to be any great recoil against it in 1960. The robust tune helps greatly in carrying it.

There is quite a story about Charles Wesley’s “Spirit of Faith Come Down.” Dr. Langdale reported insistently that the New York preachers had vigorously requested its omission. A heated debate ensued, but the hymn was kept. At a subsequent meeting the matter was again brought up, and again after a hot debate it was kept. Then at one of the last meetings it was moved that the hymn be deleted, but the majority for a last time voted to keep it.
Then when the first page proofs of the hymnal were sent around, there was a notice that "due to a mechanical page make-up, hymn number 191 (without giving the title) had to be omitted." I looked to see what was 191, and it was "Spirit of Faith Come Down." I was highly indignant and immediately wrote to Bishop Candler. He communicated with someone, and it came out all right in the 1930-34 book. And now behold! The 1960 Commission not only saw no objection to this hymn, but put in a fourth and new stanza, "Inspire the living faith, which whosoever receives, the Witness in himself he hath, and consciously believes."

On the whole there was a more unified, more solidly based Commission in 1960-64, although we did miss the able liturgical leadership of Oscar Olson, Ivan Lee Holt, and Dr. Tillett, and also Fred Adams of Massachusetts and Ladd Thomas from Pennsylvania, the last two having helped us unofficially. By 1960 "old-fashioned liberalism"—which I never did think was very liberal—had about been finished off by Karl Barth, Reinhold Niebuhr, and above all by the second World War. Requiescat in pace.

The musicians on both commissions added immeasurably to the perfection of the work. Indeed, it was said that the major weakness of nineteenth century revisions was the absence of church musicians on the committees. The bishops and leading ministers who did the revising evidently felt that they were well qualified when it came to preparing a Methodist hymnbook. But James Houghton and Earl Harper, backed by Charles Washburn on the first commission and with Guy McCutchan and Carleton Young as the respective hymnal editors, made it certain that the whole field of church music would be well represented. Austin Lovelace, organist and musician who served as head of the music sub-committee of 1960-64, brought to bear not only his own talent in the give and take of the commission's work, but edited the music of quite a few hymns.

Affixing tunes to hymns was in many cases largely left to the musicians, not always to the satisfaction of the rest of us. I accused them sometimes of being more influenced by what the American Guild of Organists had to say about a tune than what the rank and file of Methodist people felt regarding it. I personally did not go along with some of their changes. I much prefer the tune Zion instead of Cum Rhonda to "Guide Me O Thou Great Jehovah." I like the tenderness of Manoah rather than Belmont for "When All
Thy Mercies O My God, My Rising Soul Surveys.” I also feel frustrated when they leave off the chorus in “Come Ye That Love the Lord,” with its powerful “We’re marching to Zion, beautiful, beautiful Zion.” I always had my annual conferences put the chorus in when we sang that hymn—and laymen and preachers always know how to “rock back on it.”

The 1930 Commission made a bad mistake in altering, although only slightly, the harmony in eight well-known hymns, thinking to improve these. But local church congregations kept singing these hymns as they had always sung them, while the organist played by the hymnal’s new music. So confusion often ensued and the ministers rebelled. Bishop W. Angie Smith and Dr. John Rustin both told me that they instructed their organist to play the hymn as the people knew it, and to forget the new harmony. Guy McCutchan, editor of the 1930-34 hymnal, finally admitted the mistake and furnished me with the necessary revisionary statements to present to the next General Conference, asking for a return to the old tune. This I did as a member of the General Conference and the hymns were put back as they had been. This, however, did not help the hymnbooks already in the pews—only the future printings.

A United Methodist hymnal must have hymns for all manner of special occasions. The “church year” calls for songs for Advent, Lent, Easter and Thanksgiving, and we Methodists seem to have invented a season called “Kingdomtide” for the period between Pentecost and Thanksgiving. Oscar Thomas Olson was the one I remember to have been chief protagonist of this term and responsible for getting it added. Since then other churches have taken it up, and it does beat “Third Sunday after Trinity. . . . Fourth Sunday,” etc. Also there must be hymns for Communion, Baptisms, weddings, funerals, cornerstonelaying, church dedications, and the like. Sometimes an inferior hymn had to be adopted to fill out the quota for certain of these occasions, as for instance a church dedication. The page after page of index material in the back of the hymnal will make clear what a range of church life and worship must be covered by such a book when it belongs to a great modern denomination.

An insistent call came to both commissions, especially that of 1930, to put in more hymns of social justice. Methodism during this period had thrown itself with all its activistic—and sometimes unthoughted—zeal into driving hard for the “social gospel.” Both
commissions saw the need along this line, but where are such hymns beside the few we already have? The truth is, the social crusaders are not hymn writers nor poets. The sword fits their hand better than the pen, pacifists though most of them claim to be. On the other hand the poets and mystics do not enthuse over freedom marches nor go into rhapsodies over picketing the White House or telling a great international bank to what country it may lend its money. I remember hearing Bishop William F. McDowell saying to Oscar Olson, “Oscar, get us a good temperance hymn. The ones we have are such confounded rot you can’t sing them.” True, but such a hymn is still lacking. Why cannot someone give us a great marching song along the line of the “Watch and Be Sober” injunction?

In both commissions, and especially the last, the Wesley Hymn Societies pressed hard to get back more of Charles Wesley’s hymns. But while the commission sympathetically reviewed every Wesley hymn that might be thought of, it is generally conceded that the final selection preserves the best of Charles Wesley. Admittedly Charles wrote a vast amount of drivel in his thousands and thousands of verses, while also admittedly he wrote some of the finest hymns the church of the ages will ever have.

One afternoon in the 1930 Commission, after the commissioners had thrown out hymn after hymn of Wesley as being out of date or poorly phrased, Bishop Candler said warningly, “Brethren, you are certainly doing a lot to Charles Wesley this afternoon.” “Bishop,” rejoined Henry Snyder of the Southern commission, “we are helping Charles Wesley by what we have done at this session.” And the rest of us thought he was right.

If the 1960 Commission had any weakness it was in the fact that it included only two pastors—Lucius Bugbee, Jr. of New York, and the late beloved Amos Thornsburg of the Rock River Conference. Bishops and general church officers there were in plenty, and experts in all the fields of hymnody, but out of the 40,000 or so pastors who must “give out the hymns” every Sunday, there were just these two. The musicians were finely representative, and men like Will Hildebrand of California and Charles Hempstead of Iowa, who were given special assignments in dealing with the orders of worship and responsive readings, proved talented and helpful. One woman, Mrs. Floyd W. Rigg; one black, Daniel L. Ridout; and one youth, J. Robert Hammond, each helped.
The ancillary matters that must be dealt with in the compilation of a church hymnal—Orders of Worship, Responsive Readings, Lectionary of Bible Readings, and the offices of the Ritual which must be included, such as Communion and Baptism—all of these really deserve a special treatment of their own, especially the Responsive Readings. It should be said here, however, that the readings we have in the present hymnal were arranged by Charles S. Hempstead and adopted with enthusiasm by the entire commission. What Hempstead did was to shorten in a wise and skillful way the long paragraphs that were the "responses" in the former book, and arrange the present ones in terse, short expressions that congregations follow easily. This vitalizes greatly what is a beloved feature of our worship.

Bishop Edwin E. Voigt, general chairman, gave excellent leadership to the total work of the 1960-64 group, and when he presented the revised book itself as the report of the Commission, the General Conference of 1964 adopted it with acclaim. This was to the great relief of the Commission, for the 1964 body did not have the power that the 1930 group had. They presented a book which had to be taken or rejected in toto by the 1930 General Conference, with no amendments possible. The 1960-64 report could have been amended, and when Bishop Voigt presented the work and asked for approval, we wondered if the General Conference itself might undertake to debate some of the hymns as we had done. Only one man moved to strike out "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," but before any consideration could be given to this, Bishop Lloyd Wicke in the chair said quickly—and wisely, I thought—"I don't hear a second," put the motion, and the whole book was adopted.

Fourteen years have now gone by and The United Methodist Church happily uses the book everywhere. All of us see things in it that we might want to change, but there is a wealth of hymnic riches in it that enables it to measure up in every way to what a great Christian church should have today as its praise in song.