Court Poet and Pastoral Prophet: The Contemporary Church and its Song-Makers

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In December, 1994, The Christian Century profiled the English composer, John Rutter. The title described him as "The Church's Court Composer." The tone was mostly positive, but the comparison implied by the title is not entirely flattering.

The phrase "court composer" reflects the importance of aristocratic patronage in the development of western music as an art form—as distinct from popular and folk traditions. From the Renaissance (?) until about the end of the eighteenth century (?)—I am not a music historian—the national court of the king or queen, and regional courts of dukes, earls, counts, margraves, and princes, were important sources of employment for musicians, including composers.

As the title implies, a court composer was expected to provide music for public and private occasions such as banquets, dances, weddings, funerals, soirees, state visits, river excursions, and firework displays. If the composer wished to stay in favor, he (almost if not always "he") provided music that suited the patron's taste and boosted the patron's prestige. Music regarded as too difficult would make the composer unpopular. Choral and operatic themes would be unwelcome if they applauded revolution or criticized the comforts of the rich.

Thus, to call someone a "court composer" has a double edge. On the one hand, it suggests success in pleasing the court. Thus, The Christian Century article argued that John Rutter's music is deservedly popular because it is well crafted and technically inventive, yet accessible to the average church choir. On the other hand, to label someone a "court composer" suggests the unlikelihood of his offering music that is technically demanding, or with themes that disturb the imagination, question social stratifications, or trouble the conscience.

My purpose here is not to discuss John Rutter's music, but to suggest that the court composer metaphor raises pertinent questions for hymn poets like myself. Two other titles are equally pertinent: in what sense is a hymn poet a pastor and a prophet?

As a hymn poet, I am in some ways like a court composer. My metaphorical court is an assortment of less regal entities such as church congregations, denominational hymnal committees, teachers of hymnody—and Institutions of Sacred Music! Though these entities cannot lock me in a dungeon or order my execution, they influence what I write, and determine whether my hymn poems get sung. Congregations sing only what they are willing to sing. Church music professors tell their students what they think is worth singing. Hymnal committees decide what gets published in hymnals.

I cannot ignore these courts. Part of my livelihood depends on them: central to the metaphor is that the court pays the composer to compose. Because they serve the Living God revealed in Jesus Christ, I must listen to what the Holy Spirit may be telling me through them. Because they are human, and thus no less sinful than I, they may tempt me to give them paper hopes, sweet nothings, and a diluted or escapist gospel. Because I want their approval and am wary of their disapproval I may yield to that temptation.
As a writer of hymn lyrics, I am also a pastor and a prophet. As pastor I am called to love the worldwide church I am ordained to serve; to be a signpost pointing the church to Jesus Christ, the head of the Church; to listen to people's deepest needs; and to offer opportunities for people to voice the fears, hopes, sorrows, and questions that our frenetic, feel-good culture prefers to ignore.

As prophet I am called to announce the good news of God's love in Jesus Christ, who breaks barriers between human beings, loves the whole world, and cares especially for people who are impoverished, marginalized, enslaved, and oppressed. I am called to speak the fullness of God's truth as I hear it, question conventional wisdom, and encourage congregations to voice a faith, commitment, and hope more daring, and more determined, than they might otherwise venture to sing.

In practice, the roles of court poet, pastor, and prophet shade into each other like colors on a spectrum. As in a spectrum, however, there are recognizable differences between the colors, even when the boundaries are imprecise.

To summarize: my calling as a hymn poet is to serve the church by offering poems of faith for congregations to hear, speak, or sing. Because we are all incomplete Christians, what we want to sing falls short of what God wants us to sing. I therefore live in a tension between service (giving congregations what they ask for) and leadership (offering words to better shape us as Christ's disciples). To illustrate how I work, here are some examples.

**Court Poet**

I function as a court poet whenever I accept a commission to write a hymn poem, with or without a fee. Most commissions come from congregations or other church bodies. A few are from individuals. The most common motivations are to celebrate an anniversary year, the installation of a new organ, or the completion of a significant building project. Occasionally the aim is to honor a particular person. (For the record, a commission source either expects me to choose a suitable existing tune, or anticipates commissioning a composer to craft a tune once the text is written.)

Individuals have particular traits and achievements that spark a particular response. New buildings and anniversaries are less obviously unique. As regards anniversaries, for example, the obvious things are soon said. To caricature them, not entirely unfairly, they are: "Thank God for yesterday. Thank God for today. God help us tomorrow. Amen!" The challenge is to find a theme suitable for an anniversary year without churning out repetitious generics.

Here is one such attempt. In April 2002 I completed a hymn for the fiftieth anniversary of Clairmont Presbyterian Church in Decatur, Georgia, not far from my home. Because the church needed a text that could be immediately sung, I chose the tune Diademata in the poetic meter known as "short meter double" whose syllable count is: 6.6.8.6:6.6.8.6. For this meter, in today's North American culture, one or two stanzas would seem insufficient, while six, or even five, would be too many. Accordingly, I chose to work with four stanzas. Because Christ is the Head of the church, its center and reason for existence, the hymn focuses on Christ, rather than on the church that praises Christ. For Clairmont Presbyterian Church—as for many others—the Bible is of central importance. Hence, the hymn contains four titles or word-pictures of Christ, directly
or indirectly drawn from the Bible. Two (shepherd and prince) are distinctively male, while the others (teacher and nurse) can be understood in male or female terms. Teachers can be of either gender, and though nurses are still most often female, many men now work in the nursing profession, my brother and son-in-law among them. In choosing these titles I aimed to write a lyric acceptable to the commissioning court, while possibly encouraging singers to move a step beyond their first perceptions. My writing process and choice of language reflect both aims.

It is important to begin with a title that is impeccable and familiar. Thus, the opening stanza praises Christ the Good Shepherd. In the ancient world, kings are often called shepherd, and the title signifies a shepherd's absolute power over the sheep. The point (not always grasped in liturgy and preaching) is that good shepherds use their power to love their sheep and protect them, while bad shepherds terrify and "fleece" the flock. Israel knows both bad shepherds (Ezekiel 34) and God's promise to be a good shepherd (same chapter), which—for Christians—Jesus fulfills (John 10:1-16). In Luke 15:1-7, the shepherd leaves ninety-nine sheep without oversight and goes in search of the hundredth. In a middle Eastern context, the number one hundred signifies completeness or perfection—as it does today in Islam—which is why, in Eastern Christian traditions, Luke 15:1-7 is called the Parable of the Incomplete Flock. Christ has other sheep, beyond our own parochial fold, and intends to gather them all (John 10:16). Knowing Jesus' table fellowship with social outcasts, we can be sure that many of the "other sheep" are people we would rather not meet, and opponents or enemies with whom we need to be reconciled. Thus:

Christ is the Shepherd strong,
whose flock is incomplete
 till welcomed outcasts all belong
and foes in friendship meet;

On the cross, Christ reaches out to draw all humankind to himself (John 12:32). Because he was executed, though innocent and fully faithful to God, and lives forever, risen from the dead, Christ's boundless love can do this. Hence the completion of the stanza:

whose wounded hands of grace
stretch out upon the Tree,
embracing all the human race,
and setting captives free.

The second stanza introduces a less familiar image:

Christ is the gentle Nurse
who treats the wounds within
of grief, abuse, addiction's curse,
captivity, and sin;

Because this image is less familiar, and perhaps questionable to some, my commentary on the hymn observes that it reflects the centrality of healing in Jesus' ministry, and his evident power, in the culture of his time, both to cure illness and disability, and to expel the destructive habits that captivate and consume us. For the importance of healing in Jesus' ministry, see, for

who sits beside us still
to comfort, cleanse, and mend
with wisdom, purity, and skill:
our Healer and our Friend.

Returning to a more familiar image, the third stanza presents Christ as the promised Prince of Peace (which means both peaceful by nature and peace-bringing through action—Isaiah 9:6). His coming is hailed as bringing "peace on earth, goodwill to all in whom God delights" (Luke 2:14). By refusing to use force to pursue his goals and calling his followers to be peacemakers, showing mercy instead of vindictiveness, and suffering pain and evil instead of perpetuating the cycle of grievance and revenge (see, for example, Matthew 5), Christ challenges our embedded myths of supposedly righteous violence as necessary and redemptive. Because the myth of redemptive violence exercises such fascination in our culture,\(^2\) it is appropriate to describe the cross of Christ as breaking its spell, just as Isaac Watts, in his magnificent hymn "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross," testifies that "all the vain things that charm me most, I sacrifice them to his blood." I refer to Watts's hymn to demonstrate that my phrase, "break the spell," though resonant with recent popular literature, has a classic hymnological antecedent. The stanza reads:

Christ is the peaceful Prince,
accepting pain and loss
to break the spell of violence
in anguish, on the Cross;
whose healing power outlives
revenge and righteous hate,
till we forgive as Christ forgives,
and better hopes create.

The hymn concludes with another familiar image, Christ as teacher, expounding an understanding of Christ’s pedagogy that is biblical, yet not in Western terms traditional. "Teacher" reflects the title "Rabbi," which even Jesus’ opponents ascribed to him. Good teachers (and good rabbis) not only instruct (as Jesus did, in his parables, sayings, and behavioral directives), but discover, nurture, and bring out the gifts of their students, and accompany as much as lead (as Christ does, promising, as Emmanuel, God with us, to accompany us until the end of the age; Matthew 28:20). It is as teacher that Christ has authority over us—the authority not of fame, wealth, prestige, coercive power, or noble birth, but of consistent character, uniquely and completely revealing God:

Christ is the Teacher true,
who leads, yet walks beside,
to nurture gifts and visions new,
suggest, correct, and guide;
whose earthly life displays
the depth of love divine;
In 2001 I functioned as court poet to a church that changed its name. For many years, the Reorganized Church of Latter Day Saints had been redefining its purpose and mission. Centered in Independence, Missouri, the RLDS had long since separated from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints ("Mormons"), and had not joined its westward trek to Utah. Doctrinally, the RLDS had become increasingly Christ-centered, and had been led to focus especially on the vocation of Christ's disciples to form communities of reconciliation and peace. Its name misled outsiders and did not do justice to its new focus and mission. As a member of the Hymn Society in the United States and Canada, I had often met RLDS representatives, and the church had already sung some of my hymns. For institutions, as for individuals, it is no small thing to change one's name. However, by the beginning of 2001 the RLDS had decided to shed its familiar—and to many of its members, beloved—initials, and become The Community of Christ. I was delighted to accept a commission to write a new hymn lyric for the occasion. Because the lyric would find a new tune chosen by a nationwide competition, I did not have to choose a familiar poetic meter, but could focus on whatever form seemed appropriate. Here is the text:

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**Christ leads!**
From the shore to the hills,
from the hills to the plain,
Christ leads.

In the chill of despair
and the clamor of change
Christ Jesus is our guide.
God be praised!

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**Christ calls!**
From the sorrows of war
and the doorways of pain,
Christ calls.

In the silence of fear
and the anger of need
Christ Jesus speaks today.
God be praised!

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**Christ waits!**
Crucified by the pow'rs,
undefeated, alive,
Christ waits.

To the worship of force
and the praise of revenge
Christ Jesus teaches peace.
God be praised!
Christ sings!
   In a people reborn,
   reconciling, re-named,
   Christ sings.
In communion feast
and community praise
Christ Jesus makes us one.
God be praised!

Christ comes!
   In the word on the street
   and the word that forgives,
   Christ comes.
At the end of the day,
at the ultimate end,
Christ Jesus lives and leads.
God be praised!

Brian Wren, *Christ our Hope*
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Sometimes I use too many words. Here, the lines are—I believe—short and simple, as both indicated and mandated by their poetic meter: 2.6.6.2.6.6.6.3.¹ When writing a hymn I try to craft words and phrases that carry particular meaning for the commissioning body, yet are open to wider Christian use. Thus, in stanza 1, "from the shore to the hills, from the hills to the plain" suggests a typical kind of journey but also hints at the sometimes forced migrations of the first "latter day saints." Other phrases with a double reference include "to the worship of force and the praise of revenge Christ Jesus *teaches peace*"; "Christ sings . . . in a people reborn, reconciling, *re-named*"; and "in communion feast and *community praise* Christ Jesus makes us one."

**Pastor**

As a pastoral poet, I am called to offer hymns through which a congregation can express itself as a body of Christian believers. In 1968 I was, literally, pastor ("minister") of the Congregational Church in Hockley, Essex, England. Ten days before Easter, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee. Neither I nor anyone else in that congregation had visited the United States, but the Civil Rights Movement had gripped our attention and gained our admiration because of the justice of its cause and its well-organized non-violent methods.

We were shocked and saddened by Dr. King's death. I knew that I could not go into the pulpit on Easter Sunday morning and say nothing about it. The immediate Sunday was too soon, and the Good Friday worship service was not an option, because it was a neighborhood ecumenical service, and I was not the preacher. So I began to work on my sermon, trying to find Easter hope in what had happened. As I worked, I looked through our hymnal, *Congregational Praise.*
Though good for its time, it did not meet every need. All the Easter hymns seemed to be about a great triumph, long ago, far away, and high above. There was nothing that suggested Christ could be alive among us now, giving hope in the midst of our sorrow and loss. I therefore decided to write a new hymn, to be sung to the well-known joyful tune, Truro. As preacher, I had the duty of saying what I thought needed to be said to the congregation. As a pastoral hymn poet, my task was to craft words that we could all sing together with integrity. As I wrote, I imagined myself stepping down from the pulpit, sitting in the congregation, and asking, "What do we need to sing together, today?" As always, I looked for words and phrases appropriate to the occasion, yet not tied to it. Here is the text, as revised in the early 1990s:

Christ is alive! Let Christians sing.
The cross stands empty to the sky.
Let streets and homes with praises ring.
Love, drowned in death, shall never die.

Christ is alive! No longer bound
to distant years in Palestine,
but saving, healing, here and now,
and touching every place and time.

In every insult, rift and war,
where color, scorn or wealth divide,
Christ suffers still, yet loves the more,
and lives, where even hope has died.

Women and men, in age and youth,

can feel the Spirit, hear the call,
and find the way, the life, the truth,
revealed in Jesus, freed for all.

Christ is alive, and comes to bring
good news to this and every age,
till earth and sky and ocean ring
with joy, with justice, love and praise.

Brian Wren, Piece Together, #52
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The hymn begins with a statement of Easter faith: "Christ is alive! Let Christians sing." Christ is not far away and high above, but with us, here and now. Though I have revised the poem, its central thought remains, as follows: "In every insult, rift and war," amid the divisions of racism, classism, and other manifestations of "scorn," Christ suffers with us, yet outlives and outloves human evil; raised by God from death, Christ lives today, even where human hope falters and dies. Interestingly, some hymnals and anthem composers try to omit that stanza—at least they did before September 11, 2001.
In the role of prophet I ask not "What will this or that congregation agree to sing?" but "What shall we want to sing if our faith is Christ-centered?" Sometimes this means writing a hymn poem because I believe it needs to be written, in the hope that, somewhere, a congregation will want to sing it. During the early 1980s, while still resident in Britain, I was active in Oxford Christians for Peace, a local grouping in the national Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. Often romantically dubbed "a city of dreaming spires," Oxford is a university city, a magnet for international tourists, and an essential stop on hundreds of coach (i.e., bus) tours from London.

Most tourists had no idea that Oxford was ringed with nuclear installations and nuclear war targets. Fourteen miles to the north sat Upper Heyford U.S. Air Force Base, housing nuclear-bombs and nuclear-capable bombers. Greenham Common Cruise Missile Base lay thirty miles due south. British nuclear warheads were serviced at a facility thirty miles to the southeast, not far away from the Atomic Weapons research center at Aldermaston. A NATO command bunker was sited at High Wycombe, twenty-five miles to the east. If "deterrence" failed, Oxford would be obliterated.

Amid teach-ins, prayer meetings, pickets, and non-violent protests, we agonized over the theological affront posed by nuclear war. A monk, Brother Roger, imitated Martin Luther’s "95 Theses" by writing 32 Theses for Christians in a Nuclear Age. One of them remains etched in my memory: "The evils that Christians should fear most are not what their enemies might do to them, but what they might do to their enemies." This inspired me to write a hymn.

A child, a woman and a man
are people dear and close to me:
a name, a smile, a voice I know,
a hand I touch, a face I see,
yet more than I can see and know,
your Savior knows, and fully loves
that very woman, child and man.

A child, a woman and a man
are people in a foreign land
whose word I doubt,
whose hopes I fear,
whose ways I cannot understand,
and yet I need to feel and know
how Christ, my Savior, knows and loves
that very woman, child and man.

For if I somehow shift the blame
for all my fear and guilt within,
the foreigners I cannot love
will be the scapegoats for my sin,
as they look evil, I feel good,
and in the name of Christ destroy
the work of Christ, and feel no shame.

Yet Christ was hated and reviled,
and branded as the enemy—
a scapegoat who endured the cross
in love for all, and love for me,
and when I meet you, Lamb of God,
I find myself: convicted, loved,
forgiven, healed, and reconciled.

Enlarge our vision, as you can,
until we see, confess, condemn,
more than the evil others do,
the evils we might do to them.
Renew and cleanse our inmost heart,
till we are looking through your eyes
at every woman, child and man.

Brian Wren, *Piece Together*, #126
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Whether or not the above ever appears in a hymnal, I am glad I wrote it, and hold to its convictions. In stanza three the phrase "as they look evil, I feel good" succinctly describes the psychological mechanism of projection, and suggests—for those who wish to think about the matter—that "feeling good" in relation to the purportedly evil other is not the same as "being good."

I am glad to say that, sometimes, a person or congregation wants to sing a hymn with a prophetic edge to it. In 1999, the First United Church of Christ in Madison, Wisconsin, was commemorating the ministry of its senior Minister, Dr. Paul Kittlaus, on the occasion of his retirement. Because of Dr. Kittlaus' own prophetic ministry, I was able to meet the request for a hymn with the following, cast in Long Meter (8.8.8.8.):

In Christ we live, whose life was more
than teaching love and doing good.
In Christ we meet, whose trust in God
derision, fear, and hate withstood.

In Christ we hope, whose death exposed
the evil bent, the tragic flaw
in leaders, followers, and friends,
religion, government, and law.

In Christ we grieve the trampled lives
of people shunned, abused, oppressed.
In Christ we vow to serve
the weak and lobby for the dispossessed.

And if we find out how and when
to show them they are not alone,
we will not proudly be their voice,
but humbly help them find their own.

Their kindness, anger, or distrust
are angels, calling us to see the fear,
the need to have and hold,
that frame our own captivity.

In Christ we live, and life is more
than learning love and doing good,
so praise, and pray, and trust in God
who makes the earth our neighborhood.

Brian Wren, Christ our Hope
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Pastor and Person

Because hymn poems aim to express the faith of a singing community, most of mine arise from theological reflection and attentive listening to such communities. Hymns drawn from personal experience are a very small part of my output. Occasionally, however, personal experience leads to a hymn designed for a community's song. When my mother, Mabel Wren (née Blann), died in April 2001, I felt the need for a hymn that could easily be sung by the varied group that gathered for the funeral service. Though I would normally avoid a tune so strongly associated with an existing lyric as St Anne, on this occasion I chose it and wrote for it, knowing that its wide familiarity would make it easy to sing. Hoping that the echoes of Watts's "Our God, Our Help in Ages Past" would be positive, not distracting, I aimed at clarity and simplicity and, as always, looked for simple language that would suit the particular occasion yet have wider resonance. Here is the text, for your evaluation:

Deep Origin of everything,
our Ever-Present Friend,
in grief and hope your praise we sing,
aware that life must end.

Our friend has died.
We say her name and each our stories
tell to honor all that she became,
give thanks, and say farewell.

Our glimpses of her words and ways
are fleeting, and too few,
but you have numbered all her days
and know her through and through.

Your memory holds all we were
and are and yet will be,
not as an echo or a blur
but in reality.

Retrieve, repair, redeem, restore,
until again we meet,
love's far dimensions to explore,
transformed, and made complete.

Brian Wren, *Christ our Hope*
Poetic Meter: 8.6.8.6—Common Meter. For her/she substitute him/he as needed. [Copyright © Hope Publishing Company 2001. All rights reserved. Used by permission]

ENDNOTES


RECOMMENDED READING


