



# **SING WITH UNDERSTANDING**

**An inter-generational worship service  
and hymn festival  
tracing Christian history  
through the hymns we have sung through the ages**

*I will sing with the spirit.  
I will sing with understanding also.  
1 Corinthians 14:15b*

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## SING WITH UNDERSTANDING

**An Inter-generational Drama, tracing Christian history and theology through the hymns we have sung through the ages.**

Participants: Narrator, Various Youth, Various Children, the Choir, soloists, the Congregation.

Other characters (in partial or full costume) for walk-on parts:

Miriam, David, Deborah, Prophets & musicians, St. Francis, Ariens, Orthodox Christians, Martin Luther, Protestant, Catholic groups.

**NB The hymn numbers are from Voices United, the hymn book of The United Church of Canada  
Adjust the numbers to your own hymn book.**

### CALL TO WORSHIP

HYMN: "ALL CREATURES OF OUR GOD AND KING" V.U. #217

Narrator 1: One of my favourite hymns of praise! It was written by St. Francis of Assisi about 800 years ago - in Latin. That was the language of the Church at that time.

Youth 1: Wow! That's ancient!

Child 1: Is that older than my Grandpa?

Narrator 2: Older than your Grandpa's grandpa.

Child 1: Grandpa had a grandpa?

Narrator 2: Certainly. An 800 year old hymn is not really that old. The first hymns were sung and danced. Remember the story of Moses' and Aaron's sister, Miriam. She danced and sang.

(MIRIAM DANCES, WITH FOLLOWERS, AS SCRIPTURE IS READ)

Reader 1 (EXODUS 15:20-21A) "Then the prophet Miriam, Aaron's sister, took a tambourine in her hand; and all the women went out after her with tambourines and with dancing. And Miriam sang to them."

Narrator 2: In 1 Samuel we read about a bands of prophets who prophesied by song. In the Book of Judges we read of the judge and prophet, Deborah, who sang to God after a victory.

Youth 2: Didn't David dance and sing too?

(ENTER DAVID, WITH A HARP, AND OTHERS WITH INSTRUMENTS DANCE, AS SCRIPTURE IS READ)

Narrator 2: He sure did. Listen to this:

Reader 2: (2 SAMUEL 6:5) "David and all the house of Israel were dancing before the Lord with all their might, with songs and lyres and harps and tambourines and castanets and cymbals."

Youth 3: I didn't think they had all those instruments back then.

Narrator 2: Well, it says so right in the Bible. That was more than 3,000 years ago that David lived. And he wrote many of the Psalms. The Book of Psalms was the hymn book of the Hebrew people. They had hymns of praise, hymns of lament for the sad and hard times. Then there were the grand enthronement hymns for the kings.

Youth 2: They must have got a lot of comfort from the Psalms. Are they pretty much the same as some of our hymns today?

Narrator 1: All modern hymn books contain Psalm-based hymns. They've been translated, of course, from Hebrew into other languages through the centuries. Every new hymn book does some editing to bring the language up to date. Otherwise people wouldn't understand - just like the Bible itself. It contains ancient wisdom; the word of God for all time, but the people will not hear it today unless new translations make it clear and acceptable for our time. It must speak in words common to all - for the very young, the very old and all those in between. Just about the best known of the Psalms is The Lord is my Shepherd. Why don't we sing that now?

HYMN: The Lord's my Shepherd. p.748 V.U.

Narrator 1: Many of the Psalms have been Christianized. Psalm 23 always makes us think of Jesus because he said "I am the Good Shepherd." Look at Hymn #330 where Isaac Watts, about 200 years ago, took Psalm 22 and re-wrote it for Christians. The Psalm was written as a prayer for King Solomon, but Watts has turned it into a hymn about Jesus. Now, look at page 822. Let's sing verse 1 of that.

HYMN: "ALL PEOPLE THAT ON EARTH DO DWELL" v.1 p.822 V.U.

Narrator 1: You see that was translated in 1561 from a French hymn based on Psalm 100. Now go one page back to page 820 and you'll find another hymn based on that same Psalm. This one was written in 1991 by Linnea Good, a United Church Minister of Music. Let's sing the chorus of this.

HYMN: "MAKE A JOYFUL NOISE" p.820 V.U.

Youth 3: Hey, some of these Psalms don't sound as ancient as they really are!

Narrator 2: But some contemporary hymn writers have gone even further. The American hymn writer Ruth Duck wrote a hymn based on Psalm 139. That psalm tells us God is with us always. There is no place to escape from God's love. God knew us before we were born. The original Psalmist had no concept of realistic space travel, but Ruth Duck says even if we fly to unknown galaxies God will be there for us.

Child 2: God is already on the farthest edge of the universe?

Narrator 2: God is further away than even the greatest scientist can imagine, waiting for us. But God is also right here with us now, in each of our hearts.

Child 2: Awesome!

Narrator 1: Good word! Awe inspired some of our greatest hymns.

Youth 4: What about the first Christians? Did they sing hymns?

Narrator 1: Jesus and his followers were Jews, so their hymn books was the Book of Psalms. Jesus cried out the words of Psalm 22 from the cross - "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" The Christian Scriptures tell us about the early Christians singing hymns. Listen to St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians 5: 18b-19.

Youth 4: "...BE FILLED WITH THE SPIRIT, AS YOU SING PSALMS AND HYMNS AND SPIRITUAL SONGS AMONG YOURSELVES, SINGING AND MAKING MELODY TO THE LORD IN YOUR HEARTS."

Narrator 2: And in the Letter to the Colossians 3:16b.

Youth 4: "...WITH GRATITUDE IN YOUR HEARTS SINCE PSALMS, HYMNS, AND SPIRITUAL SONGS TO GOD."

Narrator 1: And to the Church at Corinth Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians: 14:15b.

Youth 4: "...I WILL PRAY WITH THE SPIRIT, AND I WILL PRAY WITH UNDERSTANDING ALSO: I WILL SING WITH THE SPIRIT, AND I WILL

SING WITH UNDERSTANDING ALSO."

Narrator 2: For the first 300 years of Christianity hymns were written in Greek because Greek was the most common language of the time.

Youth 1: Are any of those hymns still around?

Narrator 2: Certainly. Would you like to sing one of them?

Youth 1: My Greek's not too good!

Youth 2: Yeah (smiling)! About as good as my Russian!

Narrator 2: Relax! It's translated.

HYMN: "O JESUS, THINK ON ME" v.1 V.U. #607

Narrator 1: Most of the music for these ancient hymns was written much later. The hymnbook tells us the words were written in the year 440 and the music in 1579. From the 4th century on the hymns were written in Latin. That was the language of the Church for about the next 1200 years. However, in the 4th century there were lots of arguments going on about what Christians were to believe about Jesus. Athanasius taught that Jesus was begotten eternally, that is he was of the same "substance" as God the Father. Begotten in this sense means that Jesus the Son came out of the Father. The word "begotten" became very important. It meant that Jesus was with God before the world began. Athanasius and his followers were in the majority and became known as the "orthodox Christians." Those who had a different view were called Arians, after their leader Arius. Arius believed that Jesus had been created by God the Father, but was not of the same substance. He had received the title "Son of God" (as indeed had the various kings of Israel) because of his perfect goodness. Now, these two groups of Church leaders became very angry with each other. The orthodox Christians called the Arians "heretics" and forbade them to worship in the churches. So the Arians would march through the streets chanting out their belief "There was a time when he was not." The orthodox people were sing out on the same streets "From the Father's love begotten, ere the worlds began to be." That's a hymn in our book. You can find it in the Christmas section, #61. This is one of the first hymns written in Latin. Can you imagine how it must have sounded in the streets of Alexandria, where these two groups were to be found trying to drown each other out.

(ARIANS RAP "THERE WAS A TIME WHEN HE WAS NOT" ON ONE SIDE; ORTHODOX SINGERS ON THE OTHER SIDE WITH "OF THE FATHER'S LOVE BEGOTTEN. EACH GROUP GETS LOUDER AND LOUDER, UNTIL FINALLY THE ARIANS FADE AWAY.)

Child 1: That was fun.

Narrator 1: It wasn't so much fun at the time. People were sometimes killed if they didn't believe what they were told was "right." There was so much fighting going on that the Emperor Constantine, who had done much to convert so much of Europe to Christianity (not without bloodshed either), called the bishops together at Nicea. The Council of Nicea, after much arguing adopted the "one substance" theory and affirmed that God was three in one, a Trinity. To this day there are many Christians who believe Arius was right and that the decisions made at Nicea were more influenced by politics than the Spirit. However, it is belief in a "one substance" trinity that has come down to us through the traditions and creeds of the church.

One of the best known hymns to the Trinity is, "Holy, Holy, Holy." It's at 315 of Voices United. Notice the name of the tune is "Nicea" - aptly named. There's a lot of Church history in our hymn books. Let's sing a verse of that.

HYMN: "HOLY, HOLY, HOLY" v.1 #315 V.U.

Narrator 2: A few years later at the Council of Constantinople in 381 they debated the place of the Holy Ghost, who was said to proceed from the Father AND the Son. A hymnwriter of that time, Ambrose, wrote a hymn that included these two lines:

From God the Father he proceeds;  
To God the Father back he speeds.

Youth 2: I thought the Holy Spirit was a she as in "She Flies On"

Youth 3: Hey, you're jumping through time too fast. We're still in the 4th century.

Narrator 2: Well, we just know that some of the Hebrew and Greek words for "spirit" are feminine. People didn't think about those things back then.

Youth 1: Wasn't there a lot of debate over whether Jesus was human or divine?

Narrator: Oh for sure. the Council of Chalcedon in 451 decided that Jesus was BOTH fully human and fully divine.

Youth 2: I can't get my mind around that one. How could he be both?

Narrator: People still disagree about that, even within our own United Church.

Youth #3: Luckily, we don't kill each other over it any more.

Narrator: Well, mostly not anyway. It's hard to understand how he can be both. The

people who really believe he was both say there are some things that must remain a mystery. There are others who believe that Jesus was such a good and very spiritual man, more so than any other, that he was "adopted" by God as a very special spiritual leader. There are lots of beliefs in between those two extremes.

Youth 2: I suppose the important thing is to try to live our lives like Jesus.

Youth #3: Yeah! Let's leave the heavy stuff to the theologians!

Narrator 2: The word Emmanuel means "God with us" - that's why you find that word in a lot of Christmas hymns. There's an Easter hymn from the 6th century that we still sing today.

HYMN: "WELCOME, HAPPY MORNING" v.1 161 V.U.

Narrator 1: When you sing hymns, it's a good habit to get into to look at who wrote it and when. Sometimes, if you know your Church history you can take good guess as to when it was written. Another period when different factions were singing their theology at each other was during the Reformation. It was then that Martin Luther led the trend toward using the vernacular - that is the language of the people. He was German. He translated the Bible into German and wrote many hymns in German. From that time on both the Bible and hymns were in the language of the people of a particular country. Luther's best known hymn is "A mighty fortress is our God." It's been translated into 200 different languages. Luther believed that all hymns should be based on Scripture and generally speaking he practised this. However, in the fourth verse of this hymn he couldn't resist taking a jab at the Pope, whom he had often referred to as the anti-Christ. Let's sing the first and fourth verses of that hymn.

HYMN: "A MIGHTY FORTRESS IS OUR GOD" vs. 1 & 4 262

Narrator 3: Another German hymnwriter, Justus Jonas, wrote this verse for one of his hymns:

They call us heretics, and lie  
In wait to spill our blood;  
Yet flaunt their Christian name on high,  
And boast they worship God.  
Ah God! That previous name of Thine  
O'er many a wicked deed must shine,  
But thou wilt once avenge it.

And there were hymns pro and con transubstantiation - that is the belief that the bread and wine actually become the body and blood of Christ during worship.

Luther wrote many hymns about justification by faith. That is that we are saved

by faith and the grace of God alone. The Church at the time was allowing people to believe they could buy their way into heaven.

The split in the Church continued to cause Christians to fight each other, well into this century. And here's a good example: Frederick William Faber, who lived only about 130 years ago, wrote two versions of *Fathers of our Fathers* - a Protestant version and an Irish Catholic version. A few years later a Unitarian verse was added. Let's sing a verse of each:

Protestant:

Faith of our Fathers! Mary's prayers  
Shall win our country back to thee.  
And through the truth that comes from God  
England shall then indeed be free.

Irish Catholic:

Faith of our Fathers! Mary's prayers  
Shall keep our country fast to thee;  
And through the truth that comes from God,  
O we shall prosper and be free!

A few years later a Unitarian verse was added, reflecting their struggles with the Faith.

Unitarian:

Our fathers, chained in prisons dark,  
Were still in heart and conscience free;  
How sweet would be their children's fate,  
if they, like them, could die for thee.

And the new version in *Voices United* takes in mothers, sisters and brothers.

HYMN: "FAITH OF OUR FATHERS" #580

Narrator 3: Another thing Christians debated hotly about was, and still is, what is called the Atonement. That is why Jesus had to die. There are three main theories, and the Church never officially adopted any of them. The classical theory says that Christ was offered as a ransom in a great cosmic battle between God and the devil. The second theory is the substitutional one - that Jesus died in our place for our sins - even the ones we haven't yet committed. The third one is the moral influence theory that says when we see Christ on the cross it should move us so deeply that we change the world to a better place so that innocent people no longer suffer. There are hymns depicting all three of those theories in our hymn book. The first two theories have been greatly criticized as being based on ancient culture and depicting an unacceptable father role model.

Narrator 2: As perception of the Christian message changed, hymns were edited. "All things bright and beautiful," still a well loved hymn of the last century, no longer contains the verse that depicts a class system ordained by God.

The rich man in his castle,  
The poor man at his gate,  
God made them high and lowly  
And ordered their estate.

Youth 3: They must have been awful people to believe that.

Narrator 1: Well, not necessarily so. A lot of the rich people were sympathetic to the poor but didn't think they could do anything to make things more equal. So they believed God had meant things to be that way.

In Voices United there's a new verse for that hymn that's very Canadian (v.4) - let's sing that.

And then there's a verse about the Northern Lights that was written a not long ago by the children at Upsala United Church:

A million stars above us,  
The moon and milky way;  
Great streams of light and colour  
That dance across the sky.

Child 1: Children can write hymns?

Narrator 1: They sure can. Anyone who can write poetry can write hymns.

Child 2: I like that idea.

Narrator 1: Try it sometime. It's not that hard.

Narrator 2: We all know "Jesus Loves me" don't we? The original text talked about death and going to heaven being conditional on the child loving Jesus. Our theology has changed since then. We see God's love as unconditional; and children do not die of childhood diseases in the numbers they did a hundred years ago. The edited version we now sing is more appropriate for today.

Narrator 3: The Missionary Movement inspired many hymn writers. The great Christian challenge was to win the so-called "heathen world" for Jesus. The heathen were those who were not Christian. Many of these hymns have long since served their purpose and fallen into disuse when inherent racism was recognized. Some of us will remember "When the mothers of Salem," a children's hymn of not that long ago. It was in The Hymnary, (609) the first hymn book of the United Church,

published in 1930. For educational purposes only, let's sing v.4 of that hymn:

O soon may the heathen  
of every tribe & nation  
Fulfil they blessed word and cast  
their idols all away  
O shine upon them from above  
And show thyself a God of love;  
Teach the little children  
To come unto thee.

Such words are in bad taste now. We really can't sing them any more, can we? But we need to know it's in our history. That hymn didn't make it into the red hymn book of 1971.

Narrator 1: George Matheson, a 19th century writer, ahead of his time, wrote hymns that uplifted the spiritual paths of mystic Indians, Parsees, Jews and Buddhists. We are only beginning to think in these terms now in the late 20th century.

In living memory for some, is that period of Church history which practised what came to be known as the Social Gospel. The service to others, especially the poor. Many fine hymns came from that period. Here's one that's made it into our new book.

HYMN: "WHERE CROSS THE CROWDED WAYS OF LIFE" VS.1 & 2 #681

Youth 2: This Social Gospel - isn't that the same thing as when we talk about social justice today?

Narrator 3: Yes it is, but we think of it more on a world wide scale now. Liberation Theology that came about in the 1960s changed our thinking again. Before that the Church had gone into what we now call Third World countries and told the very, very poorest people not to worry about their condition. Their reward would be in heaven. But Liberation Theology talks about Salvation as Liberation - liberation now from the poverty that is so widespread. Justice must come now. This has found expression in the many folk hymns as communication technology is turning the world into a village.

Narrator 2: There are many great hymns of the past that we still use today - hymns written by writers like John and Charles Wesley, the Methodists and Isaac Watts, the Congregationalist. But what about all those great new hymns we've been singing for the last few years and even newer ones in Voices United?

- Youth 4: Some of them really jump. We love them.
- Narrator 2: There are hymns from all over the world. From Asia, Africa, Latin America. And a lot of the new hymns were written by Canadians. Some of them are internationally known. One Canadian hymn from the middle of the last century made in to international popularity. Anyone know which one? (Pause - after about 10 seconds, organist plays softly "What a friend we have in Jesus" - #664 VU)
- Child 1: My Grandma loves that hymn.
- Child 2: Mine too.
- Narrator 1: Sydney Carter is a good example of the modern hymnwriter. He's a British hymn writer, now very old. He wrote "Lord of the Dance" in the early sixties.
- Child 2: I like that one.
- Child 1: So do I.
- Narrator 2: It caused a lot of controversy at the time. Some people could not accept a dancing Christ on Good Friday. But if you think about what it means to dance from our deepest pain and despair, it makes good sense.
- Narrator 1: Sydney Carter loves to play with concepts of time and space. He wrote a Christmas carol called "Every Star shall sing a Carol." In one verse it he speculates about Christ on other planets.

"Who can tell what other cradle,  
high above the milky way,  
still may rock the King of heaven  
on another Christmas Day?"

And then in another verse:

"Who can count how many crosses,  
still to come or long ago,  
crucify the King of heaven?  
Holy is the name I know."

He goes on in that hymn to wonder if Christ will be reincarnated in another body - and who knows which? In our time we hear a lot of about seeing Christ in each other and honour that part of the other which is Christ. Sydney Carter was right on.

Let's end with another hymn of his that seems to fit right at this moment. And notice how he plays with time in this one.

(Here it is suggested the participants line up, each holding up a hymn book of your denomination, from the oldest to the newest book, in a wave fashion with the singing of the refrain of "One more step")

HYMN: "ONE MORE STEP" #639

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

OFFERING

CLOSING HYMN: "WE PRAISE YOU, O GOD" #218

COMMISSIONING

BENEDICTION

