Community of Christ Sings
A Five-year Retrospective

By Jane M. Gardner, presiding evangelist

The blessings of Community of Christ Sings began with the hymnal’s debut at the 2013 Peace Colloquy. The five years since John Bell received the Community of Christ International Peace Award and provided a keynote address (www.CofChrist.org/hymns-as-subversive-activity) show the hymnal’s growing impact as it reflects the church’s identity, mission, message, and beliefs.

After the introduction in Independence, the next summer we attended the annual conference of The Hymn Society in the United States and Canada. John Bell was also present. We were asked to introduce Community of Christ Sings in a one-hour session. It was challenging to squeeze all we wanted to say and sing into that time, so we shaped the presentation more like a worship experience. We offered short summaries of different aspects of the hymnal project and then sang songs from the new book as examples. In all, we sang 12 songs, including “The Spirit of God like a Fire Is Burning” and “Peace Salaam Shalom.” After this experience Bell offered:

My colleagues and I were discussing your hymnal and think it may be the role of denominations like yours to be prophetic for the rest of us.

—John Bell, Iona Community

With such a powerful beginning, what can be said about Community of Christ Sings since then? For several reasons, at this five-year mark it’s important to reflect and review.

To create a snapshot of Community of Christ Sings in 2018, we employed several methods, including a survey. The survey reveals that blessings continue to flow. See sidebar survey details. Among the responses:

Survey Stories

- “It has been a joy working with the youth and teaching the hymns to them. I have led a music class at senior high camp, and it has been very meaningful for all involved as we have learned the hymns together. We have provided music ministry for the services at camp with the ones we have learned. I’m so happy that I can write these words onto the kids’ hearts! A few Sundays ago, I sat by one of the youth during the worship in our congregation. He was thumbing through the hymns and stopping and reading through his favorites. It was a blessing to watch this 16-year-old boy connecting to God through the hymnal.”

- “We are building relationships with those not usually found in church buildings. We might name them as marginalized, but it’s so much deeper. It is not just doling out food or clothing—it’s actually getting to know each other. In their midst, a homeless man rose to proudly display his newest tattoo. “It’s my
favorite song in the new hymnal,” he said. “It’s ‘Leftover People in Leftover Places.’ It’s about me.”

- “Seeing tears of joy in the eyes of a Spanish-speaking member as we sing a familiar tune to her in her own language is priceless! We are growing as we attempt to live the message in this precious text.”

- “Being in a congregation in a faraway land, when I hear a song from my country in my language, I feel connected to my Community of Christ family around the world. God connects us in our diversity…”

- “It’s been a breath of fresh air to sing, read, and hear new phrases and concepts that address contemporary issues in society and point us toward God’s inclusion and desires for society to expand and embrace people. I find my heart touched and my mind open in different ways. I connect to God’s Spirit in new and different ways. In many ways it feels like a new era for Community of Christ. I also enjoy reading the hymn texts and exploring them through creative ways in and outside of worship experiences.”

Survey Comments
- “I love the new hymnal, but I also love the traditional songs in the traditional keys and words, so I do revert to the old hymnals on occasion.”
- “I like how it has challenged us theologically.”
- “I miss the old hymns.”
- “There are some great new songs, but the size/volume of the number of hymns is a bit cumbersome. We haven’t even touched many of them. I’m sure they’re great, but in small congregations we struggle to learn them. We are trying; it just takes a while.”
- “The lyrics express our faith story better than ever before.”
- “The hymnal has helped expand my awareness that we are a world church, and [we] worship in many languages.”
- “I was amazed...that many...new songs reflected what was happening in our congregation.”
- “Five years in, and we remain unfamiliar with too many songs. This detracts from worship...”
- “The more familiar the new songs become, the better I like them.”
- “The hymnal is a real treasure! The texts are wonderful and remain cutting edge. I’m also often surprised by how well they fit lectionary scriptures and themes.”

Survey Suggestions
- “Wish the recordings were slower. It’s hard to keep up.”
- “Musically, add four parts to songs that do not have them.”
- “Simplify the music.”
- “Would like more songs translated.”
• “Reduce the weight—too heavy for us old people.”
• “I wish we had twice as many vocal/choral recordings.”
• “Produce music videos of...songs you want to teach worldwide.”
• “There should be more songs from our old hymnals.”
• “Songs need to be pitched lower...”
• “Songs need to be pitched higher...”
• “We need more training...”
• “I wish there was a concordance...”
• “Would like a beginning piano book of the core repertoire.”
• “Every family should have a copy of CCS at home...”
• “Would like songs arranged for praise bands...”
• “Publish the stories about the hymns, their authors, and composers.”

Survey respondents weren’t the only ones to weigh in. When asked to reflect on the past five years with Community of Christ Sings, members of the Hymnal Steering Team offered these observations:

**Impact:** “I’m proud of the impact this book has had, both inside and outside Community of Christ. It really is on the cutting edge of so many issues, and I’ve been told it’s been a rich and much-needed resource for many ministries.”

**Unity:** It’s “…exciting to see ways that the core repertoire has united the church around the world.”

**Diversity:** “The variety of hymns from different cultures, in different languages, and even faith movements has been one of the highlights.... This is not just a USA church (though we still have a long way to go).”

**Theology:** “People have been asking new questions, reflecting on old questions and their answers then vs. their answers now. It has given theological ideas on paper that can be sung, then discussed, and even debated. This is healthy!”

**Revival and Direction:** “The book has come at a perfect time when institutionalism is finding it hard to survive. It fills the gaps between religion and spiritualism, individualism and collectivism, and nationalism and internationalism...provides a way forward in the midst of shifting priorities, perspectives, and paradigms.”

**Calling:** “Personally, this project and resource helped ignite within me a new sense of direction and calling. What a gift!”

While the church is part of an evolving landscape, it appears Community of Christ Sings will serve the needs of congregations and individuals alike for this generation and perhaps beyond. While there is always room for improvement, Community of Christ is singing! We are a work in progress. May we be open to what God is doing to shape and form us through our songs.
Six Things...
We Would Do Differently
1. Design a better process for capturing “heart songs” from around the globe and garner more global participation.
2. Include more languages in the recordings, including more vocal and choral interpretations of the songs.
3. Allow more time on music, including offering additional musician options in the Musicians’ Edition.
4. Compile stories about the songs, authors, and composers as a companion to the hymnal.
5. Add more quality controls to the production cycle.
6. Make an electronic version of the hymnal accessible online.

That Worked Well
1. Widespread participation, involving hundreds of people.
2. Hymn texts that articulate the church’s identity, message, mission, and beliefs (we are living into the texts).
3. USB flash drives that offer recordings and lyrics for every song. (Did you know the Song Lyrics flash drive can be used as a concordance?)
4. Designation of the core repertoire—more than 100 songs that have been learned within Community of Christ congregations around the globe (see page 824 in Community of Christ Sings).
5. Peace Colloquy hymnal launch, followed by field launches available in every field.
6. Topical organization of the book and an expanded topical index with more subjects relevant to today’s world.

Hymnal Survey
More than 700 people from more than a dozen countries (the majority from the USA and Canada) participated in April and May in an online survey. Demographic information mirrors the age distribution in our congregations: Half of the respondents were between ages 51 and 70, and 28 percent were older than 70. That left 22 percent younger than 50.

Questions and results:
Q1 Indicate your assessment of Community of Christ Sings as a resource within Community of Christ.
   Helpful: 85%  Neutral: 9%  Unhelpful: 6%
Q2 Indicate your assessment of the connection between *Community of Christ Sings* and your personal beliefs and spirituality.
   Connected: 88%   Neutral: 4%   Disconnected: 8%

Q3 Are you aware of the core repertoire—103 songs that have been taught and sung throughout the global church?
   Yes: 50%   No: 50%

Q4 Indicate your assessment of the importance of including multiple languages within *Community of Christ Sings*.
   Important: 84%   Neutral: 8%   Unimportant: 8%

Q5 Indicate your assessment of the importance of including a diversity of poetic and musical styles within *Community of Christ Sings*.
   Important: 85%   Neutral: 8%   Unimportant: 7%

Q6 *Community of Christ Sings* contains 50% new material (texts and music) and 50% from earlier Community of Christ hymnals. As you have used the hymnal in the past five years, indicate which response is closest to your experience.
   50/50, a good balance of old and new  69%
   I wish there were more new material   5%
   I wish there were less new material   26%

Q7 Do you and/or your congregation use the USB product, *Community of Christ Sings Audio Recordings*?
   Yes: 60%   No: 40%

Q8 Do you and/or your congregation use the USB product, *Community of Christ Sings Digital Song Lyrics*?
   Yes: 34%   No: 66%

Q9 More than 500 survey respondents offered comments, stories, and suggestions to the ninth question: What would you like to tell us about your experience with *Community of Christ Sings* since 2013? An admittedly subjective review of these open-ended responses yields this general composition:
   Positive comments/feedback:   62%
   Negative comments/feedback: 36%
   Unintelligible:   2%
Community of Christ Sings Reviews

Reviews of the most recent hymnal show the impact it has had beyond the walls of Community of Christ congregations.

“It has been said that the authentic story of a people, along with their most cherished beliefs, can best be found in the songs they sing. Community of Christ Sings will fulfill this purpose for the present generation as well as the next. It is a diverse, unique treasure trove for a denomination that loves to sing, and who will use it in their efforts to live the mission of Jesus Christ in today’s ever-changing and ever-challenging world.”


“Participants [of the Hymn Society Conference] were enthralled with the work done on this recent collection.”

“...the hymnal’s production values are very high. The typography and music engraving, and the brightness and opacity of the paper make for excellent readability. And the many fresh texts make Community of Christ Sings a commendable resource.”
—“Book and Media Reviews,” The Hymn, spring 2015, Vol. 66, No. 2, p. 27

“...Community of Christ is to be commended. Community of Christ Sings sets a high watermark of what a fine hymnal can be and a fine example for other churches and denominations to follow.”