Essay | Stephanie A. Budwey

Methods of researching queer hymnody

> 'Sometimes I feel like a motherless child' – that's how many gay and lesbian people have felt throughout the ages. Particularly in this last century, and especially in the last thirty years, gay and lesbian people have been presented as an issue, a 'church-dividing issue', to quote some. And yet, for those of us who are gay and lesbian, we know that we are not motherless children. We know that the church is also there for us. We know that people who have tried to say we don't belong in the church are wrong, and that we have always been in the church. And in fact, even when churches say they don't want us in the pews, here we are in the hymnbooks.[1]

These words began the hymn festival 'A Heart to Praise our God. Celebrating Lesbian & Gay Poets & Composers' in July 2011 at The Hymn Society in the United States and Canada's (THS) annual conference in Colorado Springs, Colorado. It was my second year attending the conference, and I was incredibly excited that there was an entire hymn festival dedicated to singing hymns by lesbian and gay poets and composers. As a Christian, church musician, and member of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, Two-Spirit, plus (LGBTQIA2S+) community, it was deeply moving to sing these songs – many of which I had never heard before – and to learn the stories behind them. This hymn festival sparked my interest in queer hymnody.

My scholarly work in queer hymnody began in 2013 when I gave a presentation on this topic for the Queering Liturgy Seminar at the North American Academy of Liturgy (NAAL) annual meeting in Albuquerque, New Mexico. This was followed in 2014 by a similar presentation at the THS annual conference in Columbus, Ohio, with members of the Queering Liturgy Seminar in attendance. I spoke about the vital need for these hymns for the LGBTQIA2S+ community and analysed examples of the queer hymns I had been able to find, looking at their texts, music, and contexts. These presentations led to my 2016 article, '"Draw a Wider Circle—or, Perhaps, Erase". Queer(ing) Hymnody', where I discussed the five categories of

[1] Mitulski & Hamilton 2011: 28.

queer hymns I had found in my research: (1) hymns reclaimed by the LGBTQIA2S+ community as queer; (2) hymns written by LGBTQIA2S+ composers and poets; (3) hymns that speak of inclusion and acceptance in general terms; (4) hymns that specifically name members of the LGBTQIA2S+ community; and (5) hymns written for specific life experiences of LGBTQIA2S+ people (e.g., Pride and same-sex marriage).[2] As I researched these presentations and article, I lamented that the queer hymns I could find were not easily accessible in one place and that there was little to no scholarship on queer hymnody.

In subsequent years, I worked to begin to address these lacunae. I continued to think about the need to gather queer hymns in one place that would be easily accessible, and this became a reality in 2019 when I was part of a working group in THS that put together the collection *Songs for the Holy Other. Hymns Affirming the LGBTQIA2S+ Community*. This collection of 48 songs 'by, for, or about the LGBTQIA2S+ community' includes a variety of musical styles and texts of inclusion, affirmation, and lament.[3] Additionally, I have written multiple chapters and articles on queer hymnody, looking at moving beyond binary language and toward inclusive and expansive language in relation to the LGBTQIA2S+ community,[4] how hymnody can create spaces that include or exclude LGBTQIA2S+ and nonbinary people in worship,[5] the past, present, and future of queer hymnody,[6] and the role that Christian sacred music has played in the movement for LGBTQIA2S+ rights.[7]

Drawing on my scholarship, this essay will discuss methods of researching queer hymnody with the hope that they may be used by others who want to study queer hymnody. First, I will look at some of the primary sources to be used, including the actual hymns, interviews with musicians and pastors, and firsthand accounts of singing or recordings of the hymns. Second, I will explore some of the secondary sources that contain reflections on queer hymnody. Finally, I will consider what tools may be used in the analysis of the hymns. Throughout this essay, I use the term 'queer hymnody' to describe hymns written by, for, and about the LGBTQIA2S+ community, and I use the term 'hymn' to describe all forms of songs sung by congregations in worship while acknowledging that worship happens both inside and outside the four walls of churches. More recently, there has been a movement by

[2] Budwey 2016: 21.
[3] The Hymn Society in the United States and Canada 2019: 2. This collection has been downloaded over 10,000 times, and at the time of the writing of this essay, there are recordings being made of some of the songs that will be available on streaming platforms.
[4] Budwey 2017; Budwey 2020.
[5] Budwey 2023a; Budwey 2023c: 177–194. For a video presentation on the inclusion of intersex people in hymnody, see Budwey 2022.
[6] Budwey 2023b.
[7] Budwey forthcoming.

some English-speaking scholars to use the terms 'congregational song' and 'Christian congregational music', recognising that the term 'hymn' denotes a certain style of song that has deep ties with colonialism.[8] Because these other terms may not be as familiar in Nordic contexts, I will use the term 'hymn' throughout this essay.

Primary Sources

The first primary resource is the actual queer hymns themselves. It is not always easy to find queer hymns as they are often scattered in different locations and not collected in one place. There are a few collections that are dedicated specifically to queer hymns, such as THS's *Songs for the Holy Other* (2019) and Dan Landes's edited collection of 32 hymns, *Sing and Be Glad: A Collection of Hymns for Open and Affirming Congregations* (2001/2018). Most queer hymns, however, are not found in official denominational hymnals or resources, particularly in denominations that are not affirming of LGBTQIA2S+ people. Dan Damon and Eileen Johnson conducted a survey of twenty North American hymnals in 2010 and found that only one hymnal, the Unitarian Universalist Association's *Singing the Living Tradition* (1993), contained hymns on LGBT justice with the topics of 'Gay Pride Day' and 'Services of union' in its index.[9] Some denominations do offer resources for the LGBTQIA2S+ community, such as the United Methodist Church's Reconciling Congregation Program, which published *Shaping Sanctuary: Proclaiming God's Grace in an Inclusive Church* in 2000, edited by Kelly Turney. This resource contains both liturgies and music, including a list of 54 hymns described as 'welcoming favorites', songbook suggestions, recordings, and 10 'new words to familiar tunes'.[10] More recently, Katie Graber and Anneli Loepp Thiessen curated 'Pride Month. Resources for Worship', a list of songs from the Mennonite Church USA and Mennonite Church Canada's 2020 hymnal *Voices Together* that can be sung during Pride Month. These examples show the importance of looking not just at official denominational hymnals but also at LGBTQIA2S+-affirming resources, both in print and online.

Metropolitan Community Churches (MCC) – also known as The Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches (UFMCC) – is a denomination that was founded in 1968 to explicitly welcome LGBTQIA2S+ people. They compiled a *Trial Hymnal* of 50 hymns in 1981 under the leadership of Jim Mitulski and Dick Follett, as well as the *Hymnal Project*

[8] See Silva Steuernagel 2020.
[9] Damon & Johnson 2010: 12–13; Johnson 2010: 21.
[10] Turney 2000: 266–323.

from 1989 to 1993 under the leadership of Jim Mitulski and Dwayne Best. Over the course of four years, they mailed 564 hymns and service music to over one hundred congregations who subscribed to the project and then used these resources to compile their own hymnals for their local congregations.[11] Both the *Trial Hymnal* and the *Hymnal Project* contain hymns for the liturgical year that have been altered to use inclusive language as well as queer hymns such as J. Thomas Sopko's 'Once we were not a people' (1987). Set to the English folk tune KING'S LYNN, this text specifically uses the words 'gay' and 'lesbian'. The MCC has churches throughout the world, and they are a vital resource in studying what hymns LGBTQIA2S+ people are singing.

Outside of denominational resources, there are groups that are committed to creating inclusive resources. The European Forum of LGBT Christian Groups created a *Songbook* of 13 diverse songs from various cultures for their 2021 conference 'Strong Voices'. The Latin American liturgy and musician network Red Crearte have written songs of inclusion including 'Santo, Santa, Sante, ¡Santo/a/e! (Trina diversidad/Triune diversity)' by Gerardo Oberman and Horacio Vivares (2021), where they name the Trinity as male, female, and nonbinary, reflecting the diversity of all humans who are made in God's image. These and other groups that support LGBTQIA2S+ people and are intentionally writing inclusive hymns are an excellent resource.

In addition to these groups, there are writers and composers who are currently writing queer hymns that can be found online or in their individual collections. Many can be found in *Songs for the Holy Other*, including Amanda Udis-Kessler, who has a website 'Queer Sacred Music' that includes her hymns. Dan Damon, a longtime ally of the LGBTQIA2S+ community, continues to write queer hymns, including some that are found in his latest collection, *Look at the Light* (2023). This includes two hymns that use the word 'intersex': 'Intersex people' (2022), set to the Gaelic melody BUNESSAN, and 'O God, you share your beauty' (2022), set to Damon's tune SHARED BEAUTY.[12] Damon wrote these after he heard my 2022 presentation 'Decolonizing Binary Language. Incorporating Intersex People in Congregational Song'. This is one instance I had where I pointed out a lacuna in queer hymnody – in this case the need for hymns that name intersex people – and a hymnwriter met that need. Another instance was following my 2014 presentation, 'Queer Hymnody. Composers, Theologians, and Writers', when I expressed my hope for more joyful queer

[11] For more on their commitment to inclusive language, these collections themselves, and the hymnal compiled at MCC San Fracisco, see Budwey 2023b 155–158; Budwey forthcoming.
[12] Damon 2023: 31, 44.

hymns, and Adam Tice subsequently wrote 'Quirky, queer, and wonderful' (2015), also found in *Songs for the Holy Other*, and set to THE Q TUNE by Sally Ann Morris.[13] If you find there are queer hymns lacking in your particular cultural context or language, I encourage you to find writers and composers who are willing to fill in these gaps.

In addition to the actual queer hymns themselves, one of the most important primary sources for researching queer hymnody are interviews with church musicians, pastors, songwriters, and leaders of queer Christian groups. When I was asked to write 'Sacred Music and Affirming Identities in the Twentieth and Twenty-first Centuries' for *The Cambridge History of Christian Sacred Music from 1500 to the Present*, I found that there was very little for me to draw on as I sought to explore the role of Christian sacred music in the LGBTQIA2S+ rights movement. I realised that I needed to speak directly with the people who had written, sung, and experienced these songs and to hear their own personal reflections on how this music had played a role in the movement toward justice for the LGBTQIA2S+ community. While I knew some of these people through my own personal networks, I also relied on them to connect me with those whom I did not know. I especially needed help in making connections and building trust with those who live in places where LGBTQIA2S+ people are criminalised. Members of THS and MCC were vital in making these contacts. For those who want to conduct similar interviews, I highly recommend reaching out to musical organizations and LGBTQIA2S+-affirming churches such as THS and MCC.

The final primary resource is firsthand accounts of singing queer hymns, including recordings of events that contain the singing of these hymns. This includes descriptions of singing queer hymns from an autobiographical perspective, such as Jimmy Creech's recounting of the 1988 North Carolina Gay Pride Weekend in *Adam's Gift. A Memoir of a Pastor's Calling to Defy the Church's Persecution of Lesbians and Gays* when St. John's Metropolitan Community Church reclaimed hymns as queer while they marched, singing hymns such as 'Jesus loves me, this I know'.[14] It also includes ethnographic works such as Ellen Lewin's *Filled with the Spirit. Sexuality, Gender, and Radical Inclusivity in a Black Pentecostal Church* where she studies the Fellowship of Affirming Ministries (TFAM) and the role that well-known Gospel songs played in their ministry of 'radical inclusivity'.[15] Finally, there may be archival material such as recordings of events or worship services that include the singing of queer hymns. One example is the collection of over 1200 cassette

[13] The Hymn Society in the United States and Canada 2019: 53–55. This text is also set to the tune ROYAL OAK. See Tice 2015.
[14] Creech 2011: 50–51.
[15] Lewin 2018: 115–144.

tapes of MCC San Francisco (MCCSF) worship services from 1987 to 2003. Parts of these recordings can be heard in the online exhibit 'The Pink and Purple Church in the Castro' by Lynne Gerber, Siri Colom, and Arianna Nedelman, as well as the podcast *When We All Get to Heaven*, hosted by Lynne Gerber. Having explored some examples of primary sources that I have found to be helpful in researching queer hymnody, I will now turn to secondary sources.

Secondary Sources

In the course of my work, I have come across very few secondary sources that analyse queer hymnody. I previously mentioned Damon and Johnson's 2010 survey of North American hymnals that found a lack of hymns dedicated to LGBT justice in topical indices, yet they also shared some recently composed queer hymns that were not found in hymnals. The script and commentary of the 2011 hymn festival 'A Heart to Praise our God. Celebrating Lesbian & Gay Poets & Composers' by Jim Mitulski and Donna Hamilton provided both the texts and music of the hymns along with background information and reflection on the hymns and their authors. Similarly, some of the primary sources I mentioned also offered analysis, such as Lewin's *Filled with the Spirit*, Gerber, Colom, and Nedelman's 'The Pink and Purple Church in the Castro', and Gerber's *When We All Get to Heaven*. Additionally, there have been publications that look at how some gay men are drawn to gospel and evangelical music[16] as well as studies of LGBTQIA2S+ people who serve in church music leadership roles.[17]

One aspect of queer hymnody that has been central in my scholarship is the use of inclusive and expansive language, specifically the importance of naming members of the LGBTQIA2S+ community who have been erased in hymnody and worship. The UFMCC recognized the significance of this topic, and in 1981 they voted 'to use inclusive language in worship when referring to God and God's people'.[18] This included hymnody, as they revised well-known hymns to use inclusive language for humans and God in the *Trial Hymnal* and *Hymnal Project*.[19] There is a tension, however, between wanting to move beyond binary language (e.g., woman and man) in order to include those who identify outside of the sex/gender binary (e.g., nonbinary people) and also wanting to specifically name members of the

[16] Gray & Thumma 2005; Harrison 2009.
[17] Jones 2020; Johnson 2022.
[18] Metropolitan Community Churches 2016: 49.
[19] Budwey 2023b: 155–156; Budwey forthcoming.

LGBTQIA2S+ community who have been made invisible by not being named. Damon speaks to these tensions and the evolution of language in hymnody in the 2023 article he wrote with Johnson, '"For everyone born". A Hymnwriter Struggles to Address All People'. In addition to sharing how he answered my call to write hymns using the words 'intersex', he also explains how he was asked to update 'For everyone born', a hymn text by Shirley Erena Murray, who had died in 2020. While the binary language of this hymn –woman/man, gay/straight – was meant to be inclusive when it was originally written in 1998, it is now seen as exclusive because it leaves out nonbinary people as well as those who are bisexual and asexual. Damon describes the process he went through with fellow hymnwriter Carl P. Daw, Jr. as they sought to remove the binary language from Murray's text and replace it with nonbinary language – 'all who share life' replaced 'woman and man' and 'all who have breath' replaced 'gay and straight'.[20] I sincerely hope that in the future there will be more secondary resources that study queer hymnody. I now turn to some tools that are important in the analysis of queer hymns.

Tools for Analysis

There are tools that are important for analysing all types of hymnody, including queer hymnody. These include textual analysis, musical analysis, and the study of the context of the hymn – both where the hymn comes from and the context in which it is being sung. In my discussion of 'Liturgical Theology and Music', I talk about the need for a contextual, holistic, and interdisciplinary approach, one that looks at the interplay of text and context,[21] moves 'beyond the text'[22] to look at the actual experiences of those worshiping and singing, and draws from multiple disciplines.[23] This work is grounded in practical theology, which asks the questions what is happening, why is it happening, what should be happening, and how should we respond.[24] These questions can help discern if hymns are ethical[25] and contributing to the flourishing of the LGBTQIA2S+ community[26] as well as where the lacunae in queer hymnody are and how these gaps might be filled.

[20] For the revised version, see Murray 2023. For reflection on the reception of this altered text in one congregation, see Gottas Moore & Budwey 2024: 17–19.
[21] Irwin 2018.
[22] Hoffman 1987.
[23] Budwey 2026.
[24] Osmer 2008: 4.
[25] Myrick 2021.
[26] Budwey 2023a.

In looking specifically at the texts of queer hymnody, I have drawn from Robin Knowles Wallace's book *Moving Towards Emancipatory Language. A Study of Recent Hymns* which uses Marjorie Procter-Smith's discussion of nonsexist, inclusive, and emancipatory liturgical language from *In Her Own Rite. Constructing Feminist Liturgical Tradition* and applies it to hymnody.[27] Resources such as *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Queerness*, edited by Fred Everett Maus and Sheila Whiteley, offer scholarship in queer musicology that disrupt binary and heteronormative assumptions about music that can be applied to the study of the music of queer hymnody. Craig Jennex and Charity Marsh's 'Introduction. Queer Musicking' offers ways to think about what the act of singing means specifically for LGBTQIA2S+ people. Finally, other disciplines such as queer theology and queer liturgical theology disrupt cisheteropatriarchical theologies found in hymns and highlight the importance of queer hymnody in worship.[28]

Conclusion

I hope that this essay on the methods of researching queer hymnody will inspire and encourage others to do research on queer hymnody. These hymns are crucial as LGBTQIA2S+ people continue to face oppression, imprisonment, and even death, simply for being themselves. In the face of cruelty and persecution, we can sing. Through our scholarship, we can share with others that queer hymns exist, hymns like Eli Cooper-Nelson's 'Mark these days with quiet moments' (2025), written for Transgender Day of Remembrance, and 'Our body is a temple, made sacred, trans, and whole' (2025), which uses the word 'enby' – another term for nonbinary – as it proclaims the sacredness of *all* bodies. In the words of Cooper-Nelson, may research on queer hymnody 'fan the liberation spark' and 'bend the arc' toward justice for all LGBTQIA2S+ people.[29]

[27] Wallace 1999: 55–96; Procter-Smith 2013 [1990]: 48–71.
[28] Slater & Cornwall 2022; Garrigan 2009; Cones, Fennema, Haldeman & Burns 2023.
[29] Cooper-Nelson 2025a.

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