

# Fabulous hymns and where to find them: cataloguing queer hymns

Sylvia D. Hook<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Kenneth R. Hull<sup>2</sup>  
s2klasse@uwaterloo.ca

1 Centre for Knowledge Integration, University of Waterloo,  
200 University Avenue West, Waterloo, Ontario Canada N2L 3G1

2 Church Music and Worship Program, Conrad Grebel University College,  
140 Westmount Rd N, Waterloo, ON N2L 3G6

**Abstract** - As society becomes more aware of and focused on LGBTQ+ issues, and as many churches are becoming more inclusive of LGBTQ+ persons, hymn-writers are reflecting this societal and theological shift in their texts. Some of these *queer hymns* have started to appear in mainline hymn books, but they are still scattered across a large number of sources, making it difficult for churches and hymn book editorial committees to find queer hymns and bring them into regular use. Since many excellent queer hymns exist, and since other authors have eloquently called for their use in worship and inclusion in hymn books, the primary remaining barrier to the use of queer hymns in the worship of inclusive churches is dissemination. I will provide criteria for determining whether a hymn is *queer*, discuss categories of queer hymns, provide an overview of the body of queer hymns, and critique strengths and weaknesses of the current body of queer hymns. I will introduce an extensive resource cataloging existing queer hymns and where to find them.

## I. Introduction

Al Carmines' hymn "Praise the Lord," written in 1974, is the first known hymn to use the word *gay* to mean *homosexual*;<sup>1</sup> in the nearly four-and-a-half decades since 1974, numerous other authors have written hymns that in some way address the particular needs of LGBTQ+ Christians. While articles on queer hymns, and calls for their use and inclusion in hymn books, have started to appear in *The Hymn* (the journal of The Hymn Society in the US and Canada), queer hymns are still rarely found in hymn books and in worship practice. This lack of usage is due in large part to a pipeline issue: queer hymns exist, and hymn book editors want to include them, but they are scattered across a wide variety of different sources, and there are no existing resources to facilitate finding them. The purpose of my research is to provide a comprehensive resource on queer hymns, in order to facilitate their inclusion in hymn books and use in worship.

## II. Definitions

*Hymns* are religious songs intended to be sung by the assembled body of a church, not by trained musicians or a church choir.

*Queer* and *LGBTQ+* are umbrella terms for lesbian, gay, bisexual (bi), transgender (trans), queer, and other minority sexual orientations and gender identities. *Queer* has an additional meaning as an

"embrace of all that is transgressive of societal norms, particularly in the context of sexuality and gender identity."<sup>2</sup> I will use *queer* when referring to hymns that go against societal norms of sexuality and gender or pertain to LGBTQ+ issues, and *LGBTQ+* when referring to people.

Defining what constitutes a *queer hymn* is not simple; in "A Heart to Praise our God: Celebrating Gay and Lesbian Poets and Composers," Jim Mitulsky and Donna Hamilton explore hymns by LGBTQ+ persons (or those long-dead who could probably be described as LGBTQ+),<sup>3</sup> while in "Draw a Wider Circle — Or, Perhaps, Erase': Queer(ing) Hymnody," Stephanie Budwey broadens the definition to include hymns reclaimed by the LGBTQ+ community (traditional hymns from an LGBTQ+-exclusive era that have been claimed by the LGBTQ+ community as affirming their welcome by God and belonging in the church, e.g. "Just as I am without one plea" and "Jesus loves me, this I know"), hymns containing the words *gay*, *lesbian*, *queer*, etc., hymns of "inclusion and acceptance that might hint at the inclusion of queer people but do not explicitly say so,"<sup>4</sup> and hymns pertaining to LGBTQ+ life events or pastoral care needs.<sup>5</sup>

Based on Budwey's work, I have developed four categories for queer and LGBTQ+-friendly hymns:

1. Hymns by LGBTQ+ authors, or those who would

now be considered LGBTQ+ if those terms were not in use when they were alive

2. Hymns that have been reclaimed for use by the LGBTQ+ community
3. Hymns with queer texts: hymns that are explicitly about or clearly reference LGBTQ+ people or issues
  - A. Hymns with LGBTQ+ words: hymns containing the words *lesbian*, *gay*, *bi/bisexual*, *trans/transgender*, *queer*, or any other words for gender and sexual minorities
  - B. Hymns using coded language, e.g. *rainbow*, *closet*, *love that dares not speak its name*; coded language is context-dependent: there are many hymns containing the word *rainbow*, for instance, that reference Noah's Ark and not LGBTQ+ representation or inclusion
  - C. Hymns that explicitly address LGBTQ+ issues or pastoral needs, e.g. gender identity, same-sex marriage or partners, HIV/AIDS
4. LGBTQ+-friendly hymns: those that do not explicitly address LGBTQ+ issues, but are applicable to LGBTQ+ issues or pastoral needs, e.g. non-gendered hymns for weddings and services of union, hymns addressing inclusion or the breaking down of barriers, and hymns about issues that disproportionately affect LGBTQ+ people, such as homelessness, suicide, and addiction

I have relied on work by Mitulsky and Hamilton as well as Budwey to know which hymn writers identify/ied as LGBTQ+ or would now be considered LGBTQ+, as well as which hymns have been reclaimed by the LGBTQ+ community. In part because of this reliance on secondary research, these portions of my database are less well-populated than the others.

### III. Overview of queer hymns found

The primary focus of my research was compiling a comprehensive database of queer hymns. My database (available at [queerhymns.org](http://queerhymns.org)) contains 179 distinct hymns. Of those 179 queer and LGBTQ+-friendly hymns, fifty-seven have queer texts (as classified above), twenty-nine were written by LGBTQ+ authors, five have been reclaimed for use by the LGBTQ+ community, and eighty-seven are LGBTQ+-friendly. Twenty-two hymns contain words

for gender and sexual minorities: *gay* (twenty), *lesbian* (six), *bi* (two), *queer* (two), and *trans* (one).

Many hymns addressing LGBTQ+ inclusion also address the inclusion of other marginalized groups. Twenty-two queer and LGBTQ+-friendly hymns address race, six mention interfaith dialogue or inclusion, five speak to class, four mention homelessness, and two address the inclusion of refugees. Note that some of these do not speak explicitly to LGBTQ+ inclusion; since the common struggle for justice is intersectional, and none of us is free until all of us are free, I have been generous with including hymns that speak of freedom, justice, and inclusion under the category of "LGBTQ+-friendly" hymns.

### IV. Strengths and weaknesses of the body of queer hymns

There are many more queer and LGBTQ+-friendly hymns than I anticipated when I began my research; fewer than thirty queer and LGBTQ+-friendly hymns have been discussed in articles on queer hymns in *The Hymn*, and I did not anticipate finding nearly six times as many, a third of which explicitly address LGBTQ+ issues.

There is a wealth of hymns speaking to the inclusion of all in the church; many of these hymns would be appropriate for congregations that are working towards full inclusion of LGBTQ+ people, but aren't there yet.

Many hymns addressing LGBTQ+ inclusion also address inclusion across race, class, religion, and ability. This intersectional approach to inclusion is important, given that many churches proclaiming "all welcome" are still racially and economically homogeneous.

There is room for improvement with regard to hymns that use LGBTQ+ words other than *gay*; the only two hymns that use LGBTQ+ words at all and do not include *gay* are Adam Tice's "Quirky, queer, and wonderful" and Edward Moran's "God of queer transgressive spaces." While these are both excellent texts (and also the only two using the word *queer*), we need more hymns addressing other identities; we need more than one hymn offering trans representation, more than two each for *bi* and *queer*, and more than six for *lesbian*. Too often, LGBTQ+ has simply meant *cisgender*<sup>6</sup> *gay man*, and this seems to be the case for queer hymns as well.

While I believe explicit mention of marginalized identities is important, we also need more hymns that clearly address sexuality and gender (and specifically minority identities within those), but do not attempt to list those they include. A hymn listing *gay*, *bi*, and *trans* as included implicitly excludes those who identify as asexual or who were born with an intersex condition, among others. We need more hymns like Laurence Bernier's "Our God is Like an Eagle," which addresses gender in nonbinary terms without naming any one identity:

Our God is not a woman,  
our God is not a man.  
Our God is both and neither;  
our God is who I am.<sup>7</sup>

The vast majority of LGBTQ+ hymns are hopeful, cheerful hymns that celebrate diversity and inclusion. While joyful hymns of praise and celebration are an important part of Christian worship, it is also important to have a repertoire of hymns that address life's difficult times: illness, grief, doubt, fear, and death. In particular, we need more queer and LGBTQ+-friendly hymns of lament: hymns that speak to us on the darkest days, when assurance of our hope in God seems empty or unattainable. This dearth of lament is not exclusive to queer and LGBTQ+ friendly hymns; it is also a problem in mainline hymn books. Lament is hard to sit with, and as a culture we tend to stigmatize mental illness and chronic physical illness, and avoid talking about death.

There are five queer hymns addressing the HIV/AIDS crisis, and one other hymn has been reclaimed for that use, but even these are not primarily lament. They carry a message of perseverance, of hope in God, and a call to action.

The only hymn in my database tagged "funeral" is an LGBTQ+-friendly hymn by Margaret Clarkson, "In sure and certain hope." While not a queer hymn

*per se*, it would work well at an LGBTQ+ person's funeral, since it provides the option of using *they* to refer to the deceased:

In sure and certain hope  
we leave them in your care, /him/her  
and wait in hope your promised day  
when we their joy shall share. /his/her<sup>8</sup>

The singular *they* is widely advocated as a pronoun option for gender-nonbinary persons. As with the hymns for HIV/AIDS, this is not so much a lament as a call to hope for the future.

In contrast to the lack of funeral hymns, the database lists thirteen queer and LGBTQ+-friendly hymns for weddings; celebrating love is easy, but walking with grief is hard.

## V. Further research

While my database provides information on where to find queer hymns, there is still no single source of queer hymns, and finding copyright permissions may still present a barrier to churches. Because of this, and to aid people in discovering the existence of queer hymns, we need more queer hymns to appear in hymn books, and we need a more comprehensive collection of queer hymns in a single published volume.

An area for further academic research is whether queer hymns adequately represent queer theology. Another area for research is exploring queer Contemporary Christian Music (CCM). While I did not draw a hard line as to what is considered a hymn and what is CCM, I also did not seek out CCM, and I know that there are, at minimum, more CCM songs by LGBTQ+ people than are in my database: Marsha Stevens, an out lesbian, is widely considered one of the pioneers of the CCM genre, but only one of her texts is included in my database.

## Notes

- 1 Mitulsky, Jim, and Donna Hamilton, "A Heart to Praise our God: Celebrating Gay & Lesbian Poets & Composers." *The Hymn* 62:3 (Autumn 2011), 28–42.
- 2 Cheng, Patrick, *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology* (New York: Seabury Books, 2011), 6
- 3 Mitulsky and Hamilton, "A Heart to Praise our God"
- 4 Budwey, Stephanie. "'Draw a Wider Circle — or, Perhaps, Erase': Queer(ing) Hymnody." *The Hymn* 67:2 (Spring 2016): 23
- 5 Ibid 21–26
- 6 Cisgender: identifying as the gender that matches one's biological sex at birth; as opposed to transgender.

- 7 Bernier, Laurence, "Our God is Like an Eagle," in *Equal Rites: Lesbian and Gay Worship, Ceremonies, and Celebrations*, ed. Kittredge Cherry and Zalmon Sherwood (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 67.
- 8 Clarkson, Margaret, "In sure and certain hope," *Hope Publishing*, modified May 28, 2009. <http://www.hopepublishing.com/html/main.isx?sitesec=40.2.1.0&hymnID=3238>. I found this hymn while looking for hymns using the word *rainbow* as code for LGBTQ+; while it is not used that way in this song, *rainbow* does appear in the second half of the second verse.