GOD WELCOMES ALL,

The Church of Scotland, (Canterbury Press 2024),

ISBN 978-1-78622-557-3

Published in 2024, *God Welcomes All* (GWA) is a rich resource for worship leaders, clergy and musicians, with hymns and songs from scripture, for the order of worship, for the church year, and for other themes.

This supplement to the Fourth Edition of the Church Hymnary (CH4) has 226 items, embracing a wide range of styles, both textual and musical, and providing a deep well of content to be drawn on at various times in the life of the local church.

As the editors remind us, 'Songs play a significant role in forming our personal faith, shaping our theology, and giving us language to speak to God.' At a time of significant change in both the Church and in wider society, 'it is important that we seek out new songs that can provide a musical and liturgical language to accompany us through the tensions and complexities of our time.'

GWA is not intended to replace current hymnbooks; indeed, there are almost certainly treasures to be found in existing books.

Ecumenical nature

The editors and committee are to be commended for the breadth of material that will serve all the Churches.

The last few decades have seen a broadening of our repertory to include songs from other traditions. As we approach Christ in authentic prayer, we discover we come closer to other Christians and people of good will.

GWA draws on texts and song from the global Church, helping us to see beyond the walls of our own local congregations. Using texts in varied languages in our liturgies and services can remind us of the universal nature of the Church.

Content

This volume opens up a debate about the whole nature of hymn and song
Alison Jack, in her Church Service Society Lecture (*26th August 2021*), refers to the need for space in poetry. While some texts in GWA help to create a sense of space, others are too immediate; although they might work in some situations, their directness may not work so well in others.

Furthermore, the danger with being 'up to date' is that contemporary texts (and music) can become dated. We can find an example of this in Scotland's innovative volume *Common Ground (Edinburgh, 1998)*, with Brian Wren's excellent 'Praise God for the harvest of orchard and field', with its references to packaging and transportation, to oil and iron. In an age of greater climate awareness, we might want to adapt these texts.

We should take performance directions with a pinch of salt. For example, 'God welcomes all' (42) has the performance marking, 'Energetically ([crotchet] = 152)'. While we can sing it at that speed, it would also work reflectively, at a considerably lower speed of about [crotchet] = 90. To be fair, the editors write that performance and other directions are intended as a starting point for creativity. While it's always important to read prefatory materials, in a space of just a few pages, the editors set out an invaluable context for music ministry.

Presentation

On the whole, the presentation of the texts and music is clear, although rhythmic spacing isn't always optimum (largely due to the constraints of the music-setting programme Sibelius). Furthermore, use of a contrasting typeface would enhance readability.

The decision to include complex rhythmic accompaniments has done the volume a disservice, as some of these rhythmic figures obscure the essential elements of the music. As Emperor Joseph II might have said, "Too many notes, my dear." It would have been better to have kept the essential elements of the music, and to have included in the Introduction models of how musicians might enhance the accompaniments. The editors could consider including examples of these in the forthcoming online digital resources referred to in the Introduction, but not visible at the time of writing *(October 2024)*.

Conclusion

Initially, I was tempted to write that this volume is a lost opportunity, mainly because of complex rhythmic accompaniments in some songs. Some months later, and to some extent, I maintain this stance.

Nevertheless, GWA is a valuable contribution to the text and music resources for any worship leader or musician.

With such a wide reach, not everything will be useful in any one setting. However, if we see this book as a resource rather than a fixed menu, it will enrich our worship.

John Kitchen's throwaway comment about an Ascension hymn, 'It's a little bit ordinary but perfectly serviceable', reminds us that not all our hymns/songs need be 'full on' or closely relevant to the Sunday theme. There will be some that will just do. And yet, others, as Alison Jack emphasises, will 'really sing in all senses of that word [and thus] may enhance our worship'.

I hope we will dig deep into the many riches within this volume to add to our repertory of treasures old and new.

Alistair Warwick, Director of Music, Holy Trinity, Stirling alistairwarwick.com