

Book of Psalms for Worship

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I remember my excitement and anticipation (for several years) surrounding the new Psalter for my denomination (RPCNA). I knew the committee had been working on it for years and when it was finally printed and I got to see the preview copies given at synod I was very impressed. Now the dust has settled and I have had time to use it extensively. This psalter in its various forms is available from [Crown & Covenant Publications](#).

Background

The psalter contains some excellent material in the front, including a history of psalm singing and a discussion of the use of the psalter and how Christ is worshiped in them.

The RPCNA originally moved from the 1650 Scottish Metrical Version to a version in 1889 that was a relatively minor update of the convoluted language and was not very widely accepted in the denomination. About 1893 the RPCNA sent delegates to join the work on the “Unified Psalter”, which eventually became “The Psalter” of 1912. After working on the committee for over 10 years, the RPCNA decided it had gone a direction they could not continue in and decided to publish their own psalter, using earlier, approved versions of psalms from the unified committee’s earlier work. This was published in 1911 and was a large success among the congregations, the main complaint being a complexity of music. Synod commissioned a revision of the music portion of the psalms in 1919 and another in 1929. Both revisions changed little to the psalter, with the latter adding a couple of additional selections but not changing much of the prior versions. There was another revision in 1950 that also changed little but more than the previous revisions did. In 1973 a more thorough revision gave the *Book of Psalms for Singing* and placed our psalter in the tradition of including the text in between the

lines of music. Older language was retained but great effort was made to render it easy and fluid to sing.

After a more than a decade of work the psalter revision committee completed the latest revision and it was published in 2009. It is a complete reworking of the psalter to bring it up to modern-day language, much like the FCS' and RPCI's recent psalter revisions.

Format

The psalter looks absolutely beautiful. Bars of musics are standardized so that opposing pages no longer look mismatched. Everything is clean and easy to read and follow. The psalter's colophon states they used Adobe's InDesign and Stempel Garamond for the text. I believe this is very appropriate. Each psalm is clearly labelled with the verses that it includes and also has a verse from the New Testament at the top of each selection, appropriately tying in Scripture with Scripture.

All in all, this is one of the most beautiful music books I have seen, psalter or hymnal.

The psalter comes in four basic formats (excluding a limited edition, and spiral-bound "large print" edition):

The Standard "Pew" edition

Very sturdy and hardbound, better quality than the old hardbound *Book of Psalms for Singing*.

The Softcover edition

Perhaps helpful for precentors who use a stand or for laying flat on a surface, it is softbound, thin, and lays open easily. It is full-size, however.

The Mini Psalter

This is quite popular among the youth in our church. It is about the same thickness and paper as the larger editions but shrunk down to about half the size and with a soft cover. Note that this is not for people with poor eyesight! 4 by 6 inches.

The Thin Mini

Also 4 by 6 inches and probably my favourite edition, this soft-cover edition uses thinner paper to cut the thickness down by at least half. Slightly larger

than a pocket Bible, still very readable, and yet very portable.

Also available is a PDF version available by license at a reasonable price for those who would like to use it with a projector in their congregation. From the iTunes app store there is a very nice app available for iPad that shows the full sheet of music and allows one to play midi files. The Android app is less featured as of this time and no development has been done on it in over a year.

Translation

There was a good amount of concern when the new psalter was released. Many had become very familiar with the 1973 “maroon” psalter and were reticent to give it up. Others liked the stylistic language of the old psalter and saw no reason to update it to modern English. There was even one letter to the editor in the RP Witness that thought this change of language (from thee and thou) would be “only detrimental” to the church!

However one feels about it, I do think the committee did a reasonable job with what they set out to do and that was to revise the 1973 psalter into modern English. To do so they

consulted both the Old Testament Hebrew and modern English Bible translations (e.g., NASB, ESV, NIV, NKJV) throughout its work, seeking always to be sensitive to the wide array of matters that related to such a revision project: accuracy, clarity, readability, singability, and various nuances of poetic genre.

The translations are noticeably loose in some areas (as was the older psalter). I think the meaning is still captured and nothing false is taught, but where you fall on the “literal” versus “singable” spectrum will determine whether you like this or not. I had one person tell me that in his scrutiny of the Psalter before it was published that he found the 1973 to be more faithful to the Hebrew in about half the time and the new psalter to be more faithful about 1/3 of the time, with the remaining 1/6 of the time them being about equal.

Regardless, the text has been made much, much more singable in my mind. Awkward phrasing and archaic words have been eliminated and some of the repetitive rhyming has been corrected. It flows smoothly and is very understandable for the common person. We have had many people visit our congregation and enjoy singing the Psalms with us.

In the first edition there were some psalm portions that I believe violated the principle of not tampering with Scripture (inserting “allelujah amen”

as a refrain for example). Synod quickly addressed these and subsequent editions have had these offending psalms removed.

Music

The music has been vastly improved in my mind. Many new tunes have been added and several old, difficult tunes have been removed. Psalm 119X is still included but as 119W now. Oddly, to my mind, many think this tune is far too difficult, and all I can it is quite beautiful when all the parts are going and it is really not that difficult once shown (and once it is pointed out that the melody is the tenor line).

There really are some beautiful new tunes, some done by members of the denomination and the marriage of words to music is better than I have ever seen done before. 42D and 16D are excellent examples of this. 13B and 99A have become congregational favorites.

There are still a few psalms where “filler” lines are included that, for example, repeat the last line sung. I dislike this personally.

Conclusion

My main complaint (and it is a big one) is that one cannot sing through all the psalms. Let me explain. This is not a problem for some because they only ever sing psalm *portions* anyway (when is the last time you sang through all of Psalm 68?). I have been increasingly convicted however that we have moved away from the practice of psalm singing and moved toward psalm *portion* singing. Sometimes our congregation only ever sings the second half of a psalm and we miss the context of the first half (perhaps how oppression in the first half turned to praise in the second). As such, we are in danger of singing only those portions we like, as opposed to singing the whole counsel of God.

The old 1973 psalter was very conscientious about this and would have the entire psalm in the same meter, sometimes the entire psalm would be in several different meters, but you could still sing through the entirety with each. This is no longer the case. Excluding Psalm 119 (which naturally is broken into selections) I count 14 psalms that cannot be sung all the way through. An additional 4 can be done, but awkwardly because they combine say, 86.86.86 with CM selections. An additional one can be done but only if you repeat two verses.

Additionally, there are another 25 psalms where only a portion of the psalm is available for that specific meter. So while Psalm 95 can be sung in

entirety in selections A, B, and C put together, D is just a fragment and if you use this tune you cannot sing the whole psalm.

As I said, this is not a problem for everyone and as far as I know I seem to be the only one who has noticed this. I have had several people say they do not recall this ever coming up at synod or the Psalter reviews so I can only assume it was an oversight and not intentional. I am in the process of writing a letter to synod and I hope that this will be addressed in future editions, as I believe it to be theologically important.

Nevertheless, this is an excellent psalter, though not as word-for-word accurate as other psalters. If there are theological issues with how something is translated I would be glad to have it pointed out. I have not yet seen the RPCI psalter but the only one that I would place in contention with this psalter overall, for congregational use, is FCS's *Sing Psalms*. In music/text marriage it is superior and in overall format I really love it. It is delightful to be blessed with such a beautiful and up-to-date Psalter to use in the church. One of the really nice things is that all of the tunes are available on Psalter.org and Crown & Covenant also sells CDs with the psalms being sung quite beautifully by various groups. There are also some congregational recordings of some of the psalm selections available at www.thepsalmssung.org.