

VIII. REPORT

OF THE SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON PSALMODY

We cannot use the Psalms without them touching our whole being. We cannot turn to them but we are uplifted, encouraged, challenged and humbled. As they lead us, we find those who have gone before us and we discover that the words they used in praise, thanksgiving and worship are the words that come to our lips, for these very words spring up from the depths of our souls. When we seek to choose those portions of them that would have our people lift up their hearts to the Lord in public worship, we confess that we would love to have heard them as they were taught and as they were sung in the synagogue in Capernaum or Nazareth. It hasn't always been that we have been most touched in public worship when the pews were full but that it actually was when few of us were present and when the Lord was pleased to bless the singing, uncouth and uncultured as it may have been to the trained musical ear, yet together we lingered over words that were sweeter than honey to our taste, and heaven and Christ were near and precious to us. No words of mere men can bring Christ to presence Himself with us as the Psalms which are growing older each passing day and yet are ever new. These Psalm, Hymns and Spiritual Songs will ever find a child to sing with sweet and tender conviction; "The Lord is my shepherd", and we pray that the little ones would be brought to Christ early. They will ever find a young couple, as they stand to make their marriage vows, sing with expectation for the days ahead; "O enter then his gates with praise". We trust that they too will be blessed in their family. When we are aware of the trembling sinner fearful yet hopefully singing the words in their hearts, for their throat is constricted and nothing will escape their mouths "He took me from a fearful pit", we remember the first time we too "went forward". And we long for the truth of the words "And to thy glory afterward receive me to abide" to be true for us all.

The 1650 Psalter has endured to this day, and we gladly use it for our private, family and congregational worship. It was the result of prolonged careful and painstaking work on behalf of the Scots and carries the stamp of Scottish care and piety. Dr. John Ker in his book, published after his death, *The Psalms in History and Biography*, writes;

No version has ever been made which adheres so closely to the Scripture. It proceeds on the principle of giving every thought in the original and nothing more; and in this it has succeeded to an extent which is marvellous, and which can be realized only by one who has tested it through careful comparison. It meets with some stones of stumbling and suffers some dislocation of words by adhering to the line laid down; but there is abundant compensation in the life and energy, the picturesqueness and colour, which it preserves by close contact with the old Hebrew soil. The thought stands out clear, distinct, forceful, not wrapt up in worldly paraphrases where David himself would have difficulty in recognising his meaning, or liquefied into weak sentimentalisms from which his manly nature, to take no higher view, would have turned away ashamed. This too may be said that these portions which the heart feels that it needs in its sorrowful hours, over which it leans and pores in its deep musings, or from the summit of which it mounts as on eagles' wings in its moments of joy, have a tenderness, a quaint beauty, a majesty in their form, peculiar to that age of the English language in which they were framed.

We may not be trained professional singers in our congregations, but no trained professional loves and appreciates these words more than do our people wherever they gather. Yes, it would be wonderful if our precentors always knew what tune they were going to sing before they open their mouths. It would be wonderful if they knew how to sing, not too high and not too low. However, we love our precentors for the

job they do, because not only do they love these Psalms that those in time past loved and we love today, but together, above all, we love the Saviour of whom they speak. We appreciate that they do what they can for Him. It would be wonderful also if those in the pew would follow the lead of the precentor, with their eyes on him to give heed to his guidance, and that they would have confidence in singing from “memory”. Surely if we should have any part of God’s Word “hid in our hearts that we might not sin against Him”, it is the Psalms. It would do something for all of us, if all in the pew would sing instead of leaving it up to others. Yet we love the joy and contentment that we each have found with the old Psalms that have found a lodging place in our hearts. We would not change them for God has given them to us to sing to the honour of His name. We would not change them for God has promised to bless His Word, the foolishness of preaching, but not any man-made alternative.

There is one common cry that we hear from our precentors; “Why can’t we get a note of the Psalms on the Saturday or even the Friday before the Lord’s Day?” The Committee would make this plea on behalf of a good number of our precentors; “Ministers, why can’t you give us, your precentors, a note of the Psalms at least on the Saturday, by email, phone, text or even at the very minimum a half-hour before the morning service begins; even to give us a copy of the Psalms to be sung at the evening service when you give us the Psalms for the morning worship, we assure you would be a help to us?” Believe me, brethren, it may seem very little to you, but to our precentors it means so much to be able to have time to choose tunes that are appropriate, and to practise at home with the pitch, and making sure how to fit the words to the tune. That in turn makes such a difference to the comfort of our people in singing, and it will lift our congregational singing. Ministers, you can’t squirm out of it, you are responsible. Many believe that potentially-good young precentors can be spoiled by being led into bad habits that receiving the Psalms at the last minute can give.

The Psalmody Committee are more than happy to give whatever guidance and help they can, especially in the holding of Psalmody workshops. In practice we need very few fingers, no more than one hand in fact, to count the congregations that ask for that help. Ask the folks who gather in Portree or Stornoway if they find it helpful for precentors, adults and children. Remember, distance is no object!

Fathers and Brethren, where do we go to report on the ongoing work of your Psalmody Committee? We have sought faithfully to go about our business on behalf of the General Assembly and the Church at large. Our responsibility to our ministers, and students, precentors and those in the pew, yes, and even further afield, we seek to fulfil.

The *Worthy to be Praised* CDs have now reached volume 10, giving in total 120 of the tunes in the Psalmody. God willing, we will finish this project with two more by 2016. This will complete a resource for listening and learning 144 of the 193 melodies in the current Psalmody, and in extending the repertoire of precentors and congregations. Our young and not-so-young continue to sit the yearly exam. We are thankful to those who help them. It does help those who teach them to have a copy of the CD with the new tunes each year. Commissioners are encouraged to buy at least one copy to take back with them. A great deal of thoughtful prayer and preparation goes into the making of them, and again our thanks are due to our sound engineer, Mr. Robb Alcorn, who gives freely of his time, to Miss Esther Semmens, who so skilfully prepares the inserts, to our team of singers, and to the congregation of Aberdeen who, trained by Miss Flora MacLeod, gave background colour to four of the twelve singings. These folks deserve the sincere thanks of all. Without the drive and enthusiasm of Mrs Isobel Scott in organising, in preparing meals, in keeping the singing team on their toes and in her quiet but sure ways in bringing out the best of us, we would certainly not have got this far. The preparation of these CDs is done in-house.

There is a love for the metrical Psalms that is spreading in these days, and requests come in from far flung places for the CDs and for the Teaching Manuals, as well as for the Staff Psalmody. There is such a demand for the latter that a further reprint of three hundred copies has been ordered for delivery in time for

this Assembly. Mr. Brian Lynch of Riley Dunn & Wilson has proved again how helpful he and his team are. We express the sincere thanks of the Church to them.

Our brethren in the Presbytery of the USA have asked for a copy of the Psalm tunes in electronic form as one of their number, Mr Sam Gerdt of Greenville, has software that can produce the music in sound in four part harmony, as well as in the individual soprano, alto, tenor and bass parts. This should prove to be a good aid to those who seek to learn their part, and to aid those congregations that wish to sing in harmony rather than all sing in unison. We look forward to hearing what can be done, and to listening to its quality, and to discovering its usefulness in practice. We commend this brother and those supporting him.

It has been a special joy for the Convener to meet and to share with a dear Presbyterian minister in Spain who holds to unaccompanied Psalm singing, the Establishment Principle, and the Westminster Confession of Faith. Rev. Jorge Ruiz, who expects to visit the Assembly, not only became a convinced unaccompanied Psalm singer, he had to, the Lord helping, produce a metrical form of the Psalms in Spanish. It took seven years from start to finish. We commend him and his small scattered Congregation to your prayerful support.

The thanks of the General Assembly are due to the Committee members and especially their Clerk. They each of them in their own way keep the whole Committee on its toes, including of course, the Convener. Thanks are also due to the Gillies family in Stornoway who set up and run the website, www.sing-the-psalms.webs.com. The Committee commend this site, and urge people to visit it and let others know of it. This web-site can take orders, including orders for the CD series *Worthy to be Praised*, and both Staff and Sol-fa Psalmodies.

WILLIAM B. SCOTT, *Convener*
CALLUM MACLEAN, *Vice-convener*

PROPOSED DELIVERANCE

1. The General Assembly receive and adopt the report of the Special Committee on Psalmody and thank the Committee;
2. The General Assembly give thanks to God for the dedicated Precentors in our Congregations who give diligent, devoted and careful leadership to our worshipping people and encourage Ministers to ensure that they are given a note of the Psalms to be used in worship timeously to enable them to fulfil their duties;
3. The General Assembly encourage the holding of Psalmody Workshops to assist in congregational praise;
4. The General Assembly commend to the Church the latest volume (Volume 10) of the 12 volume series *Worthy to be Praised* for widespread use by Psalmody classes and for daily edification of all;
5. The General Assembly thank Mrs. Isobel Scott and her team, including Mr. Robb Alcorn, the sound engineer, and Miss Esther Semmens, the graphic designer and Miss Flora MacLeod and her singing class in Aberdeen for their help in producing the latest Psalm CD;
6. The General Assembly give thanks for the unexpected need for a reprinting of the new edition of the Staff Psalmody; in particular they thank the Committee and Mr. Brian Lynch of Riley Dunn & Wilson for their work thereanent;
7. The General Assembly thank the Gillies family, Stornoway, for their promotion of Psalmody through the website www.sing-the-psalms.webs.com;

8. The General Assembly note the Supplementary Report and congratulate all those who took part in the Psalmody Test and thank those who helped them on the way as well as those who tested them;
9. The General Assembly note with interest the plans to produce a sound version of the different tunes and harmonies;
10. The General Assembly rejoice to hear of the increasing interest in exclusive, unaccompanied Psalmody throughout the world and commend the practice as that which alone is sanctioned by the great King of the Church for the praise of his people.

APPENDIX

42 took part in the 2014 Psalmody Test (27 less than in 2013) and gained awards as shown:

Aberdeen (Group Award)

Grade 3: Mercedes Adeva (Adult), Rob Budgen (Adult), Kathelle MacLeod (Adult), Alex. Watt (adult, continuation), Elsie Watt (adult, continuation), Sandy Weir (adult, continuation)

Grade 4: Matthew McGlynn, Tim McGlynn (adult)

Grade 5: Agnes McGlynn (adult), Sophie McGlynn, Verity McGlynn

Cross

Grade 1: Heidi MacLeod (continuation)

Grade 2: Felicity MacLeod

Duthil-Dores (Group Award)

Grade 2: Colin MacDonald (adult), Carine MacDonald (adult); Joan MacKintosh (adult, continuation)

Knock & Point

Grade 3: Ruaraidh MacLeod (continuation)

Grade 4: Alexander MacLeod

Inverness, Free Greyfriars (Group Award)

Grade 2: Heidi Morrison (adult), CallumArie Morrison

Shettleston

Grade 2: Marion Fraser (adult), Andy Taylor (adult), Dolina Taylor (adult), Alan Wilson (adult), Angela Wilson (adult)

Stornoway

Grade 1: Lydia MacDonald (duly performed), John MacDonald (duly performed) Duncan MacDonald (duly performed), Calvin MacKenzie (continuation)

Grade 3: Sarah Craig, Susanna MacDonald (duly performed)

Grade 4: Thomas Craig, Isla MacDonald,

Grade 6: David Craig (adult, continuation), Emma Craig (continuation), Lily Craig (continuation), Rachel Craig (continuation), Joanna Gillies, Jonathan Gillies

Tarbat

Grade 3: Malcolm MacLeod (adult)

Grade 6: Murdo MacLeod (continuation), Veda Joy MacLeod (adult, (continuation)