

Hope, Joy, and Wonder: The Hymns of Rae E. Whitney

by

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“HOPE, JOY, AND WONDER: THE HYMNS OF RAE E. WHITNEY”  
MARTY WHEELER BURNETT

Project under the direction of Professor William F. Brosend

Rae E. Whitney is a widely published author of over five hundred hymns. Her texts are characterized by rich Biblical imagery, liturgical orientation, and a deep personal faith.

Whitney’s hymns are also reflective of her diverse life experiences. A resident of Scottsbluff, Nebraska, her texts appear in hymnals in the United States, Canada, England, Scotland, Hong Kong, and Australia.

This project presents a biography of Rae E. Whitney, drawing from interviews, lectures, published collections of hymns, and unpublished resources. Born in England in 1927, Whitney came to the United States in 1961 following her marriage to an Episcopal priest, the Reverend Clyde E. Whitney. She assisted her husband in parish ministry by serving as a licensed lay reader, chalice bearer, and educator. In retirement, the couple spent one year serving as missionaries in Guatemala. Since her husband’s death in 1992, Whitney has continued active involvement in her parish and diocese. She is a regular presenter at regional and national conferences, and her most recent book of hymn poetry was published in 2007.

Although Whitney composed her first hymn as a teenager, the bulk of her writing began in middle age and continues to this day. A chart directs the reader to Whitney’s hymns in nine hymnals of mainline Christian denominations in the United States. Detailed analysis of selected hymns by Whitney includes the following elements: liturgical usefulness; poetic structure and quality; accessibility; date of composition; availability for use; information about the tune with which the hymn is paired.

Whitney's hymns bear the influence of decades of change within the Episcopal Church and the American cultural landscape. Her particular interests in the roles of women in the church and society, mission, and ecumenism have provided foundational material for her writing. In her lifetime, Whitney has witnessed remarkable changes in the Episcopal Church – a transformation from the complete exclusion of women from liturgical roles to a modern period when women's ministries have been acknowledged and welcomed. As a result, many of her hymns include women and feminine imagery; several hymns focus specifically on the ordination of women. Hymns with themes of stewardship of God's creation, social justice, and peace are also identified and related to Whitney's life experiences.

The practical component of the project involved the preparation for and presentation of a Rae Whitney Celebration in Omaha, Nebraska in April, 2009. The series of events included a lecture by Whitney at a local college, a workshop for church musicians, the commissioning and premiere of a new hymn by Whitney, and a hymn festival featuring Whitney's work. The festival included the first performances of two new choral settings of hymns by Whitney. A video recording of the hymn festival is included with the document. The project culminated with a choir tour in which musicians performed musical settings of Whitney's hymns in churches across Nebraska, including Whitney's home parish. In preparation for these events, all published choral settings of texts by Whitney were collected and reviewed. Settings were selected for inclusion in the hymn festival based on usefulness in parish music ministry and compositional quality. In addition to hymns that have gained widespread acceptance in denominational hymnals, less familiar texts deemed worthy of attention were also chosen. The program included a



Whitney was born in Chippenham, Wiltshire, England on May 21, 1927. She was the only daughter of Arthur James Phillips and Alice Martha (“Pat”) Davis Phillips. Her only brother, Kenneth, died at age seven when Rae was five years old. Whitney’s childhood and youth included a variety of religious affiliations. She was baptized as an infant in the Primitive Methodist Church in her home town. After her brother’s death, her parents stopped attending church, but as Whitney states, “...they enjoyed hymns. Dad would hum them a lot. My mother would join in, and it seems that the hymns they had learned as children stayed with them as a source of comfort and joy and through which, I believe, they remained in touch with God.”

Whitney was the first member of her family to attend grammar school. Whitney recalls that her mother was criticized by relatives for letting her attend, since she was “just a girl.” She attended Chippenham Grammar School and was “Head Girl” in 1944-1945. In an interview with the author, she describes her experiences:

I attended the regular “state schools” where, by law I think, we had daily assemblies of the whole school for hymns, prayers, etc....I started attending school at the age of three (my five year old brother didn’t want to go to school alone, so they let me go, too!)...I was thus daily exposed to one or two hymns for fifteen years! We had daily “Scripture” in the classrooms through primary school. “Religious Knowledge” was taught weekly in the secondary school.

Her childhood musical studies included piano and violin lessons; she played in the school orchestra for assemblies, where she “learned the alto part of a number of hymns, and knew from then on that hymn tunes actually had names!” Whitney recalls that “in those days, everybody in Britain knew hymns. They would get sung on coach trips, in pubs, and at soccer games, too...a hymn like ‘O God, our help in ages past’ was sung at all national or local occasions. And hymns were sung daily at almost all schools.”

Whitney remembers a formative event from her childhood which fostered her interest in hymns:

I've always loved hymns since I was a little child. When I was about seven years old, my parents took me to a huge rally of thirty thousand people at an area of caves and cliffs at Burrington Coombe in southwest England. The gathering was to commemorate the writer of "Rock of Ages," Augustus Montague Toplady, who, legend says, was caught there by a storm, and he managed to hide in a huge cleft in the rock. There were massed choirs, Salvation Army bands – can you imagine the sound that rose up from that canyon!

After completing her School Certificate at age sixteen, Whitney continued her studies to receive a Higher School Certificate at age eighteen. In addition to the required seven subjects, students were allowed to choose one additional subject: Domestic Science, Woodwork, Art, Scripture, or Music. In an interview with the author, Whitney explains her choice:

Girls couldn't take woodwork (my first choice!), I disliked the art teacher, the domestic science woman drove me crazy, and I certainly wasn't religious! That left me with music, which I knew little about, but it would be with a teacher I found fascinating. We had no gramophone at home; I'd never listened to music on radio. But in those two years in class, I listened to music on a gramophone, including several symphonies, which I was taught to follow with a score. I learned something of the shape of a sonata. I learned the lives of some of the composers. I learned basic harmony and was taught to invent a bass line for a treble line and vice versa. And got some sense of what music was all about.

Whitney's parents had continued to send her to Sunday school until she rebelled at age ten. As a Girl Guide, Whitney had the opportunity to visit several different churches with her "company" as they carried the colors. In an interview with the author, Whitney states:

When I was about sixteen – the morning after we had the only bombs that were to descend on my hometown – I started going to the Baptist Church with another

Guide friend. This led to much involvement in this church, and my receiving Believer's Baptism at about eighteen.

In this congregation, Whitney found "a warm community of believers" led by a dynamic young minister, Joe Rogers. Tragedy struck when the pastor died suddenly of pneumonia at age thirty-three; his wife, Violet, committed suicide several months later. Whitney responded by writing her first hymn; as she states, "my grief and bewilderment, co-mingled with my new faith, led me to write:"

Love hath claimed thee from on high,  
Love hath given sleep to thee  
Love hath heard my heartfelt cry,  
Love hath called thee, "Come to Me!"

*Refrain*

"Come beloved, come and rest,  
Lay thy head upon My breast;  
Grief is now a joy that's blessed;  
Sleep, beloved, sleep."

Joy hath come to fill thy heart,  
Joy has cured thy bitter pain;  
Joy has caused hurts to depart;  
Joy repeats that song again:

*Refrain*

Peace is thine forevermore;  
Peace is flowing, full and free;  
Peace thy wholeness will restore;  
Peace is calling, "Come to Me!"

*Refrain*

*(With Joy Our Spirits Sing 58)*

Whitney continues:

I wrote it to express my own feelings – not to share with anyone – and maybe that was when I found that writing texts was a form of praying...a way to capture one's disjointed, at times wild, thoughts and words and bring discipline to them. And I found that I could talk and listen to God through such words.

While attending a Baptist summer camp, Whitney met missionaries and felt a call to mission work. In an interview with the author, she states:

Until then, I hadn't planned to go on to college (since no one in my family had), but I discovered I couldn't be a missionary without skills to offer – and that I should probably be trained as a teacher. I could have chosen a two-year college, but that would have permitted me to teach in primary schools only. So I applied – rather late! – to the University of Bristol, hardly knowing anything about it, but it was the only one I knew well since it was only twenty-four miles from my home. Well, I got admitted, having received a full county scholarship, on condition I would teach several years after university. It was terrific timing for me! The War ended in summer of 1945, and I started at the University in September. By Christmas, the places at the University were being filled by servicemen (and a few women), and it would probably have been impossible for me to get a place after that.

Whitney received a Bachelor of Arts (English Honors) degree in 1948 and a Certificate of Education in 1949 from the University of Bristol. During her college years, she was active in the Student Christian Movement. She was elected President of the Bristol University Branch of SCM in 1947-1948.

However, as Whitney matured, her “idea of becoming an overseas missionary faded.” She states, “my discomfort with rival denominations, that had plagued me from my teens, grew stronger...I made a pledge to God that if ever I could work full-time for Christian unity, I would do so. At this time, I wrote the text, ‘In Jesus we are one’ (*Leoni*), but again it was not for sharing:”

In Jesus we are one;  
to God the Father sing!  
We praise his name for his dear Son  
and homage bring.  
All glory to our King,  
for we to him belong;  
may all the earth in triumph ring,  
with thankful song.

In Jesus we are one;  
though drawn from many a race,  
diverse in custom, color, tongue  
and social place.  
Yet through our Savior's grace,  
there is no bar to love;  
such differences he can efface  
his will to prove.

In Jesus we are one;  
his love all else transcends;  
our Savior Christ will cast out none –  
all are his friends.  
And though our sinning rends  
the heart of Christ our Lord,  
still to the suffering soul he sends  
his love outpoured.

In Jesus we are one,  
our love in his entwined;  
may we in all good works begun  
his Spirit find.  
O God, we pray you, bind  
our hearts in unity,  
so that each heart and soul and mind  
in Christ be free!

*(Under the Fig Tree 62)*

Whitney taught English and Religious Education in secondary schools in Bicester, Oxfordshire and Wotton-under-edge, Gloucestershire, from 1949-1958. She taught in London from 1958-1960. While working as a teacher, she served as a lay preacher in Baptist, Congregational, and Methodist village chapels. Around 1957, she was confirmed in the Church of England by the Bishop of Gloucester in Gloucester Cathedral.

Rae Whitney has maintained a lifelong interest in ecumenical concerns. From 1958-1960, she served as resident Co-Secretary of the Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius, an organization devoted to work between Eastern Orthodox churches and churches from

the West. During these years, Whitney lived at St. Basil's House, Notting Hill, in London. Regarding her "call" to this position, Whitney states:

One day I was invited to become co-secretary there, with a priest from South Africa. I didn't want to go. Rejected the ideas for months. I loved the school where I was teaching, the beautiful little Cotswald town, Synwell Chapel and its people – everything! I had no desire to go to live in smoggy, noisy London. And the salary offered was half of what I was getting as a teacher. But I remembered my vow...that if ever I had a chance to work full-time for Christian Unity I would do so. Now I had the opportunity!

Then followed two very difficult years. Teaching had been much easier! But they were extremely valuable years. I met people from many countries - lots of clergy, many on their way to "fame" within the Church. Eric, my co-secretary, and I planned meetings twice a month at the House and conferences elsewhere. We helped edit a journal and kept in touch with some two thousand members. We were host to many visitors, often from overseas, for a bed or a meal. There were daily services in the Chapel, usually Orthodox or Anglican – sung services, but, alas, not many hymns – but I did learn about liturgy!

In June, 1960, she met her future husband while traveling with a tour group in Italy. The Reverend Clyde E. Whitney, an American born on October 3, 1901, was the rector of St. Andrew's Episcopal Church in Scottsbluff, Nebraska. "It was truly love at first sight," she states in an interview with the author. She elaborates:

We stayed in a convent in Rome. He took me up on the roof garden the third night, and, with fireflies flashing, and a full moon in the background, he kissed me. "What's your name?" I said, "I can't call you Father any more!" At the entrance to the Sistine Chapel, a day or two later, I asked him how old he was. When he told me, my heart sank. I'd hoped he was a well-worn young guy, but found he was a very well preserved man of fifty-eight. I was thirty-three. He proposed a couple of days later at Assisi. "Nonsense!" I said. "I've only known you a week." By the time we got back to England, I knew we were in love, and I accepted his ring.

After becoming engaged, the couple traveled to Nebraska to meet Clyde Whitney's mother in McCook and to visit his church in Scottsbluff. Rae Whitney recalls, "I had

never even heard of Nebraska until I met Clyde! And I had never considered visiting the USA.” She continues:

I came back with him in late July/August to see what my future home would be like. We came by boat to Montreal, and then by train to Albany, Chicago, Omaha, Scottsbluff. In Omaha, we stopped to meet Bishop Brinker and Winnie, and then took a train that night to Scottsbluff. The town seemed unexpectedly “foreign.” I was warmly welcomed – the congregation was very surprised! ...After a month, I returned to London to work at my new teaching job...since I had promised to work until Christmas. Clyde left Scottsbluff on Christmas Day and went by train to New York, where he flew into Heathrow, arriving December 29.

They were married on December 31, 1960 in her parents’ home parish in Chippenham, Wiltshire, by Oliver Tomkins, Bishop of Bristol. Recalling the wedding, Whitney states:

The wedding included a Eucharist – very unusual then at a wedding – using bread from Clyde’s family wheat farm and baked into a loaf by the mother of the Greek priest at Bayard (Nebraska). This came about because the “low church” rector of the parish said he hoped we wouldn’t be using those new-fangled wafers!

Rae Whitney moved to Scottsbluff, Nebraska with her husband and assisted him in his work. She was the Director of the Sunday School, which at that time included eighty to one hundred children. During their years in Scottsbluff, the couple initiated the local observance of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. During the mid-1960s, they worked to establish the Transfiguration Retreat and Conference Center at Bayard, Nebraska. The couple traveled to the Holy Land in 1964, an experience that inspired Rae Whitney to write several hymns, including “Terra Sancta, Holy Land” (*With Joy Our Spirits Sing* 88) and “On Golgotha when earth was new” (*Under the Fig Tree* 137). Rae Whitney became a citizen of the United States of America in 1968.

The couple shared a love of music and hymns. Prior to becoming a priest, Clyde Whitney had worked professionally as a jazz musician. He assisted the Reverend Canon C. Winfred Douglas, the editor of *The Hymnal 1940*, with his work at the Evergreen Conferences in Colorado. Rae Whitney reports that “Clyde said he was the human Xerox machine that copied out the tunes by hand for the small tune committee to consider.” Rae Whitney wrote a hymn based on their favorite Bible verse, Luke 12:32: “Fear not, little flock; it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” They had discovered this verse while sailing across the Atlantic Ocean on their first trip to United States:

One day, on deck, we were reading Morning Prayer together, and the appointed lesson happened to be Luke 12. Suddenly out of the pages leapt verse 32...It was a verse neither of us had consciously seen before! From that moment on, we had no doubt about our future life together...That text was “ours,” and some twenty years later, I wrote the song:

*Refrain*

Fear not, little flock!  
Fear not, little flock!  
It’s your Father’s good pleasure  
To give you the kingdom.

Consider the lilies that in beauty grow;  
They toil not, they spin not, yet true glory show.

*Refrain*

Consider the ravens, they worries deplore,  
For they know that God has sufficient in store.

*Refrain*

Sell all that prevents you from following me,  
For where lies your treasure, your heart too will be.

*Refrain*

Don’t covet possessions that fade and decay,  
But seek first the kingdom, and with me you’ll stay.

*Refrain*

Boast not of fine clothes nor of how well you've dined;  
Be rich towards God, and true treasure you'll find.

*Refrain*

I came to enkindle the whole world with fire!  
I pray, make God's kingdom your whole heart's desire.

*Refrain*

*(With Joy Our Spirits Sing 16)*

After Clyde Whitney's retirement in 1969, he served the English speaking congregation in Guatemala City, Guatemala, for one year. Rae Whitney worked alongside her husband in Guatemala. During the next twenty years, Clyde Whitney worked as an interim priest at several parishes in Nebraska and Wyoming. Rae Whitney assisted her husband as a licensed lay reader and chalice bearer – uncommon roles for women at that time. From 1979-1985, Rae and Clyde Whitney were local volunteer coordinators for the American Bible Society. In 1988, they moved to a retirement community in Gering, Nebraska. Clyde Whitney died on April 22, 1992. He is buried in a small cemetery near Scotts Bluff National Monument. His tombstone is inscribed with the verse from Luke, "Fear not, little flock..." and, from Psalm 98, "Sing to the Lord a new song!" Rae Whitney intends to be buried at his side upon her death.

Rae Whitney is an active member of St. Francis (previously St. Andrew's) Episcopal Church in Scottsbluff, Nebraska. She was elected Diocesan President of the Episcopal Church Women in 1976-1977. She served two terms on the national Episcopal Church Women Triennial Committees from 1973-1979. Whitney served as the Worship Chairperson for the 1979 ECW Triennial Meeting in Denver, Colorado. The theme for the meeting was "Walking in the Light," and, as Whitney states, "we based our three

Communion services on the hills of Transfiguration, Golgotha, and Ascension.” Whitney wrote this “theme hymn” for that meeting, sung to the tune *Herzlich tut mich verlangen*

*(Passion Chorale):*

The king shone in his beauty  
with raiment glistening white,  
while Moses and Elijah  
spoke with that radiant Light;  
Lord, take us to that mountain,  
and teach us things of thee,  
that through thy love and wisdom  
we may transfigured be!

The Savior hung in sorrow,  
disfigured piteously;  
The Light lay dead in darkness  
upon cruel Calvary’s tree;  
Lord, take us to that mountain  
and crucify our sin,  
that we may find redemption  
and heaven’s vict’ry win!

The Master stood in glory  
alive upon the hill,  
commissioning his followers  
to know, and do his will;  
Lord, take us to that mountain,  
empower us mightily  
that we may go and witness  
and bring the lost to thee!

*(With Joy Our Spirits Sing 93)*

By this point, Rae Whitney felt comfortable sharing new texts with her friends. When one of her friends forwarded a text to another friend in Germany, Rae received a letter from the German woman stating that the hymn, “If I never risk,” had changed her life. Whitney states that this “confirmed my feeling that what I was doing was of value.”

If I never risk, then I’ll not feel the pain  
that comes from rejection or someone’s disdain;

if I never risk, then I need not expose  
my feelings to others or share in their woes.

To love is to risk being hurt or ignored,  
and finding God's grace is sufficient reward.  
To love is to enter a neighbor's despair,  
replacing with hope all the apathy there.

To pray is to risk comprehending God's will,  
and hearing the Christ of the Cross call me still.  
To pray is to suffer and stumble and fall,  
while struggling for justice and freedom for all.

For only through risk can my heart ever know  
the meaning of life and the way I should go.  
When risk has unchained me and set my soul free,  
then I may become what God wants me to be.

*(With Joy Our Spirits Sing 32)*

Rae and Clyde Whitney joined the Hymn Society in the United States and Canada. When the Hymn Society issued a call for new hymns for the World Council of Churches Assembly in Vancouver, Canada in 1983, one of Rae Whitney's hymns was selected as one of four chosen and published in the Society's journal, *The Hymn*. Rae Whitney has remained active in the Hymn Society and regularly attends its conferences.

Whitney states that "when I first wrote hymns, I had so many things I wanted to write about – they just burst forth. Now I need a reason to write." In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, Whitney responded by writing a hymn:

When all the world is wounded  
with nations primed for war,  
when horrors of destruction  
loom larger than before,  
when we, confused, encounter  
those who delight to kill,  
O Prince of Peace, draw nearer,

and help us know your will!

When all the world is watching  
cruel actions of a few,  
it stands, bereft, bewildered,  
uncertain what to do;  
revenge is not the answer,  
nor is an empty peace;  
Lord, may respect for justice  
throughout the world increase!

When all the world is fragile,  
aware it might explode,  
we count on you, Creator,  
our spirits to uphold;  
though hearts are sick and grieving,  
and nothing seems secure,  
relying on your goodness,  
by faith we will endure.

When all the world is ready  
to live in harmony,  
when goods of every nation  
are shared out lovingly,  
when your commands are followed,  
true peace will bless each home;  
then, Lord, we'll know your kingdom  
on earth has surely come!

*(Under the Fig Tree 164)*

Whitney has received reports of this hymn being sung in many places, including Chicago, Kosovo, and Australia.

Most of Whitney's hymns are now written as a result of requests or commissions. Her recent work has included making English metrical translations of hymns written in other languages. She has completed a number of translations of Portuguese hymns for John Faustini in Brazil, and she is currently translating French hymns for a new hymnal for Cameroon in West Africa at the request of John Thornburg. Whitney works from a literal

translation of the original text and then crafts a metrical version suitable for singing. She also recently wrote a hymn for a local Lakota-Lutheran center at the request of their pastor, incorporating Native American imagery. As part of this doctoral project, Whitney was commissioned to write a new hymn for Trinity Episcopal Cathedral in Omaha, Nebraska – “God of hope and joy and wonder.”

Although her writing has taken many forms, Whitney is most widely known for her five hundred hymns. Whitney’s approach to hymn writing was outlined in a lecture at College of Saint Mary in 2009:

A text writer needs to have certain skills in verse writing, but also something to teach; she should have a knowledge of the Bible, and a living faith in God as revealed in Christ. A hymn should help others to worship in spirit and in truth, and encourage in them a love of God.

In the 2005 edition of Erik Routley’s *A Panorama of Christian Hymnody*, six of Rae Whitney’s texts are published with comments by Paul Richardson: “Christmas has its cradle;” “It was God who ran to greet him;” “Myrrh-bearing Mary;” “Music and incense;” “Sunday’s palms are Wednesday’s ashes;” “That King, before whose majesty.” (742-747)

In the Introduction to her collection of hymns, *Fear Not, Little Flock*, Volume I, Whitney writes:

Although always a lover of hymns, I never set out to be a hymn poet. A few texts were written in my younger days, but I didn’t really start writing until the late 1970s, when I found such an activity to be a way of praying. Then friends and critics, such as my husband, Clyde, and Marian Barnett (AGO), convinced me to share my texts with others.

Whitney's first collection of hymns was *The Transfiguration Book of Hymns and Songs*, named for the Transfiguration Retreat and Conference Center in Bayard, Nebraska. It contained fifty-eight hymns and was published by her husband in 1978. Suggested tunes from *The Hymnal 1940* were noted for each hymn. One of her early hymns from this book, "Before the earth was tossed in space," was adapted and included in both *New Songs of Rejoicing* in 1994 and *As Bright As Lightning: The Hymns of Dan Locklair* in 2002:

Before the earth was tossed in space,  
the light of heav'n shone from your face;  
as you turned darkness into day,  
reveal your glory, Lord, we pray!

When Moses met with Israel's Lord  
on Sinai's peak, your brightness poured;  
as he in friendship talked with you,  
reveal your glory, Lord, anew!

Elijah heard that still small Voice;  
to follow You became his choice;  
as your new power on him did pour,  
reveal your glory, Lord, once more!

A star shone forth upon the earth  
to guide those guests to greet your birth;  
as Wise Men saw the Child adored,  
reveal your glory, now, O Lord!

Your friends upon the Mount, who saw  
transfiguring Light, were filled with awe;  
as you shone for these chosen three,  
reveal your glory, Lord, to me!

Upon the cross, your light grew dim;  
they tortured you in every limb;  
but, conquering death, you rose to reign;  
reveal such glory, Lord, again!

*(New Songs of Rejoicing 76)*

Nine texts from *The Transfiguration Book*, along with thirty new hymns, were included in Whitney's next publication, *Fig Tree Songs I*, in 1981. *Fig Tree Songs I* contains "Myrrh-bearing Mary from Magdala came," a hymn which would later be included in several hymnals. Each hymn in *Fig Tree Songs I* is set to an original tune by Whitney. The simple tunes are notated with the melody line and chord symbols. Regarding the hymns in *Fig Tree Songs I*, Whitney writes in an e-mail to the author:

...when I gathered them together in 1981, the first batch added up to 39 (a nice number – Books of the Old Testament and the 39 Articles!). Since a couple of my texts mentioned fig trees in the New Testament, I called it *Fig Tree Songs*. I self-published it (using a pre-Xerox machine)...I think I typed on some kind of film...ink had to be squeezed on the rollers...and people bought copies at a dollar apiece to help the Retreat House at Bayard! The next batch of 39 became *Fig Tree 2*, then FT3, FT4, FT5 (total of 195 [texts]). At that, I decided to change to Oak Trees, and five more books resulted. Now I am doing Palm Trees, but I am still on Book 4! As you see, it's a way of filing as well as dating my texts, and also of counting them.

In *The Hymnal 1982 Companion*, Raymond F. Glover cites Book Two of *Fig Tree Songs* as the source for Whitney's metrical paraphrase of *The Song of Simeon*, "Lord God, you now have set your servant free." The hymn appears in *The Hymnal 1982*. (499) Glover quotes Whitney's description of the hymn's creation:

It is difficult to claim this text as "mine" since the text has traveled a long way! First it was Simeon's, then Luke's and then known and loved in a variety of translations. I was reading Compline from the 1976 Prayer Book with Clyde one night, and when we reached the Song of Simeon, this metrical hymn leapt out from the text for me to catch! My version is therefore very closely based on the new translation in the 1976 Prayer Book. (I caught a tiny glimpse of what Michelangelo went through when he "saw" David in a chunk of marble waiting to be released!) (936)

In the Foreword of *Fear Not, Little Flock, Volume I*, Glover later writes:

One of her earliest and finest texts, which I believe has now reached the status of being a *classic*, is a paraphrase of the Song of Simeon, *Nunc Dimittis*, "Lord God, you now have set your servant free."

He mentions that this hymn, first published in 1981, is included in hymnals in the United States, Canada, and Australia.

Whitney's major publications include: *With Joy Our Spirits Sing: The Hymns of Rae E. Whitney*, a collection of 230 of her hymns published in 1995; *Fear Not, Little Flock, Volume I*, a collection of forty-one of her texts set to tunes by contemporary American composers and published in 2006; *Fear Not, Little Flock, Volume II*, a collection of additional texts and tunes published in 2007; and *Under the Fig Tree: More Hymns and a Few Poems*, published in 2007. In the Foreword to *Under the Fig Tree*, this author wrote:

Through her hymns, we learn about this remarkable woman: her care for God's creation; her commitment to social justice; her scholarly depth; her lifelong interests in church history and ecumenism; her celebration of women's ministries. Whitney's works avoid mindless repetition, sentimentality, and an exclusive focus on personal devotion. Rather, her texts are clearly intended for the life of the Christian community. Often starting with a familiar Biblical image, Whitney's hymns relate the gospel to the present age and invite singers to join in the ongoing faith story. (*Under the Fig Tree* 5)

Whitney's hymns have received critical acclaim. In the Foreword of *With Joy Our Spirits Sing*, Terry W. York, a member of the committee which selected two of Whitney's texts for inclusion in *The Baptist Hymnal*, writes:

Some poets consider it their duty to write for other poets. Some write to explore the outer reaches of their art. Rae Whitney is an artist of the noblest sort. She uses her considerable gift to communicate with others.

In the Introduction to the same collection, publisher David P. Schaap adds:

Rae E. Whitney's hymns speak volumes about being a Christian and give us new insights into Bible stories we've grown too accustomed to hearing. It is her

sensitivity to the human condition and the spiritual needs of people in the late twentieth century that have made her hymns find their way into more and more hymnals, and into the hearts of those that read and sing them.

In a review of *With Joy Our Spirits Sing*, Howard M. Edwards, III states:

Nebraska is the home of Cather, Carson, and Cornhuskers...and Rae E. Whitney. Whitney's new hymn collection, *With Joy Our Spirits Sing*, is a gift to the church. She has a way with words and is a good listener as well. Many of her texts are based on Scripture, sermons, and her devotional reading.

Many worshipers were introduced to Whitney's work by her paraphrase of the "Nunc Dimittis" found in *The Hymnal 1982*. There are many texts of equal quality in this collection...

Terry York called Whitney's hymns "bite-sized sermons." I agree and encourage you to get your own copy of this "banquet." (51-52)

Twenty-six of Whitney's hymns appear in *New Songs of Rejoicing*, a collection of 171 new hymns published in 1994. Three hymns from this collection – "Grant us wisdom to perceive you," "Myrrh-bearing Mary," and "Sunday's palms are Wednesday's ashes" – were selected for inclusion in recent hymnals and hymnal supplements published by the Episcopal Church, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the United Church of Christ, and the United Methodist Church, as well as a non-denominational, ecumenical hymnal.

Eight of Whitney's hymns have been included in recent hymnals and hymnal supplements of mainline Christian denominations in the United States. These are listed on the following chart.

|  | H82 | VF | PH  | STF  | FWS  | BH  | NCH | NHCS | GC |
|--|-----|----|-----|------|------|-----|-----|------|----|
| Christ has promised to be present            |     |    |     |      |      |     |     |      | 87 |
| Christmas has its cradle                     |     |    |     |      |      | 152 |     |      |    |
| Eternity touched hands with time             |     | 39 |     |      |      |     |     |      |    |
| Lord God, you now have set your servant free | 499 |    | 604 |      |      |     |     |      |    |
| Grant us wisdom to perceive you              |     |    |     |      |      |     | 510 |      |    |
| Myrrh-bearing Mary                           |     | 2  |     |      |      |     |     | 299  |    |
| O what a wonder it is                        |     |    |     |      |      | 548 |     |      |    |
| Sunday's palms are Wednesday's ashes         |     |    |     | 2138 | 2138 |     |     |      |    |

H82 = *The Hymnal 1982* (Episcopal)

VF = *Voices Found* (Episcopal supplement)

PH = *The Presbyterian Hymnal*  
STF = *Sing the Faith* (Presbyterian supplement)  
FWS = *The Faith We Sing* (United Methodist supplement)  
BH = *The Baptist Hymnal*  
NCH = *The New Century Hymnal* (United Church of Christ)  
NHCS = *A New Hymnal for Colleges and Schools* (non-denominational, ecumenical)  
GC = *Gather Comprehensive* (Roman Catholic)

None of Whitney's texts are included in the *Lutheran Book of Worship* (1978), *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (2006), or *Wonder, Love and Praise*, the Episcopal Church's authorized hymnal supplement published in 1997. As an Episcopal hymn writer whose work was included in *The Hymnal 1982* and was well known at the time of the supplement's production, it is curious that her hymns were omitted from that volume. It is also remarkable that only two of her texts were selected for *Voices Found: Women in the Church's Song*, a more recent Episcopal hymnal supplement featuring works of women authors, translators, and composers. Furthermore, *Voices Found* does not include two of Whitney's hymns used in the hymnals of other mainline denominations, "Sunday's palms are Wednesday's ashes" and "Grant us wisdom to perceive you." In the *Voices Found Leader's Guide*, published in 2004, authors Marilyn L. Haskel and Lisa Neufeld Thomas state that "Rae E. Whitney has focused on hymn writing only in the last fifteen years." (2, 39) This statement appears to be adapted from Whitney's biography on the Selah Publishing Company web site which states, "In the last 15 years Rae has focused on her hymn text writing." While Whitney has focused on hymn writing during the past fifteen years (and Selah has published her work during that time frame), the *Voices Found* article creates an inaccurate impression that is inconsistent with the historical record of Whitney's self-published works dating to 1978 and her statements that she wrote hymn texts prior to that year.

Whitney's growing reputation as a hymn writer resulted in the opportunity to serve as one of three judges, along with Gerald Iverson and Walter Brueggemann, in selecting hymns for *Sing Justice! Do Justice!* This collection of new hymns addressing issues of social justice was the product of a competition sponsored by Alternatives and The Hymn Society in the United States and Canada. It was published by Selah Publishing in 1998. As a courtesy, the publisher included one of Whitney's hymns, "We are stewards of God's grace," in this collection. The hymn, also found in *With Joy Our Spirits Sing*, deals with themes of creation, ecology, and stewardship. (103)

Additional hymns by Whitney dealing with social justice issues are included in *Carols with Justice*, an online collection published by Alternatives for Simple Living. The organization's website states:

Jesus' birth has taken on much cultural significance as a celebration of good will, warm feelings and excessive consumerism. These new stanzas help to connect his birth with our lives. They appeal for social justice, care of Creation, and discipleship for simpler living.

(Archives: Carols with Justice)

Whitney contributed a new stanza for "O Little Town of Bethlehem:"

No longer dreamless, Bethlehem,  
You bear the wounds of war;  
Can words of peace make conflict cease,  
When freedom is no more?  
No! Therefore, work for justice,  
Let swords thrust none apart,  
When all are free, the world may see  
Christ born in every heart.

(Archives: Carols with Justice)

Whitney also added a new stanza for "Once in Royal David's City:"

Christ, who once was Mary's baby,  
Loves each child upon this Earth,  
And desires that truth and justice  
Welcome ev'ry human birth.  
We who pledge to follow him,  
Make our lives a Bethlehem.

(Archives: Carols with Justice)

Several of Whitney's hymns are particularly useful for various occasions and seasons in the liturgical year. Carol Doran composed a tune, *Kingsbury Place*, for Whitney's hymn, "Music and incense." In describing the hymn, Doran states, "Not only for funerals, this unique hymn is for joyful singing when forgiveness is preached and the nature of the Christian community is celebrated." (Doran 42) Whitney's hymn speaks of redemption and hope with an intriguing combination of biblical and liturgical images and direct, simple language:

Music and incense,  
dancing and laughter,  
welcome each sinner  
now to love's feast;  
come to the party,  
clothed in the finest,  
freely provided  
for every guest!

Shame and discomfort,  
fear of rejection,  
horror of dying,  
panic and pain;  
these will be banished  
by Christ our Savior,  
for he in glory  
ever will reign.

So enter singing,  
circled by angels,  
knowing Christ's kingdom  
none can destroy;  
greeted by loved ones

eagerly waiting,  
come, pardoned people,  
into his joy!

*(New Songs of Rejoicing, 92)*

Whitney states that she wrote this hymn for *Bunessan*, the tune commonly associated with “Morning has broken.” In addition to a new tune by Carol Doran, the text is also available in *Fear Not, Little Flock, Volume II* with a tune by Ray W. Urwin (*Kidder*).

“Sunday’s palms are Wednesday’s ashes” is appropriate for the season of Lent. In the “Commentary on Hymns” contained in *The Faith We Sing Worship Planner*, the following suggestions are given:

This hymn refers to the custom of burning the palm branches from the previous Palm Sunday (around eleven months ago) for Ash Wednesday. Thus, it is very appropriate for that service, as a prayer of confession. But consider also using it throughout Lent perhaps as a weekly prayer of confession, or as the prayer of confession in any communion service. (97)

As indicated on the previous chart, this hymn is included in the hymnal supplements of both the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the United Methodist Church.

Sunday’s palms are Wednesday’s ashes  
as another Lent begins;  
thus we kneel before our Maker  
in contrition for our sins.  
we have marred baptismal pledges,  
in rebellion gone astray;  
now, returning, seek forgiveness;  
grant us pardon, Lord, this day.

We have failed to love our neighbors,  
their offences to forgive,  
have not listened to their troubles,  
nor have cared just how they live;  
we are jealous, proud, impatient,  
loving overmuch our things;  
may the yielding of our failings

be our Lenten offerings.

We are hasty to judge others,  
blind to proof of human need;  
and our lack of understanding  
demonstrates our inner greed;  
we have wasted earth's resources;  
want and suffering we've ignored;  
come and cleanse us, then restore us;  
make new hearts within us, Lord.

*(With Joy Our Spirits Sing 87)*

In both the Presbyterian and United Methodist hymnal supplements, this hymn is paired with a familiar folk tune suggested by Whitney, *Beach Spring*. *New Songs of Rejoicing* contains two original tunes for this text by Betty Carr Pulkingham (*East End*) and Wilbur Held (*Sunday's Palms*). (25-26)

Whitney states that “Break open the jar in the presence of Jesus” is “based on Mark 14:3 and written to celebrate the ministry of women.” (*Fear Not, Little Flock*, 65) In an interview with the author, Whitney elaborates that she wrote this hymn in response to a call for new hymns to be used for commemoration of the ordination of women in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. She notes that her hymn was not selected. The hymn's message of encouragement and hope serves as a quintessential example of Whitney's poetic style. Starting with a familiar Biblical image, she relates the gospel to the present age, and then, in the final stanzas, invites the singers to join in the ongoing faith story.

Break open the jar in the presence of Jesus,  
and set free its perfume of joy and delight!  
Though others may scorn you for wasting your treasure,  
let love give you courage to do what is right.

To lay up life's mem'ries in earthen containers  
allows dust to enter and rust to increase;  
let each past achievement rise fragrant as incense,  
and make disappointments a ladder to peace.

Fear not to break open the jar of new vision,  
where wonder, adventure, and hope are concealed;  
through them, find fulfillment in serving the Savior,  
for in acts of beauty, fresh truths are revealed.

Christ Jesus accepted the gift of the woman,  
whom he had unshackled from sickness and sin.  
Her fame he foretold, for he knew how she loved him;  
break open your jar, and let living begin.

*(Fear Not, Little Flock, 12)*

Several of Whitney's hymn texts have been used in anthem settings, both published and unpublished. One well known published anthem is "Without the Fire" by composer David Ashley White. Other published anthem settings of Whitney texts include works by composers Frederick Frahm, J. William Greene, Carl Johengen, Roy Hopp, Amanda Husberg, Austin Lovelace, Stan Pethel, Itেকে Prins, K. Lee Scott, and Linda Cable Shute. A well known setting of "Myrrh-bearing Mary" by David Hurd is published by GIA Publications, Inc., under the title "Two New Hymn Tunes."

Whitney maintains an active professional schedule. She delivered a presentation on *Fear Not, Little Flock* at the Annual Conference of the Hymn Society of the United States and Canada in Ottawa on July 15, 2007. She presented a workshop, "New Hymns and Holy Helpers," during the Calvin Institute Symposium on Worship in Grand Rapids, Michigan, on January 24-28, 2008. During the symposium, a hymn festival featuring her hymn texts was held at Woodlawn Church. A massed choir, formed from local church

choirs, led the singing of hymns and presented anthem settings of Whitney's texts. Whitney delivered a presentation on writing hymn texts and led Jazz Vespers services with Edward Doemland at the 2009 Calvin Institute Symposium on Worship, held January 29-31 in Grand Rapids. One of Whitney's hymns, "May Your Life Be Filled with Gladness," was selected for the 2010 AGO/ECS Publishing Award in Choral Composition competition. The winning composition will be performed at the American Guild of Organists national convention in Washington, D.C., in the summer of 2010 and published by ECS Publishing.

Rae Whitney currently leads three small Bible classes each week and serves as a lector and lay Eucharistic minister. Her memberships in professional and service organizations reflect her interests in hymnody, ecumenism, education, history, literature, and women's issues. Whitney is a member of the YMCA, the American Association of University Women, the Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius, the Hymn Society of the United States and Canada, the Hymn Society of Great Britain and Ireland, the local Cooperative Ministries Council, and a Great Books study group. She was a member of the Scottsbluff County Commission on the Status of Women.

In addition to hymn poetry, Rae Whitney has written in several other genres. As a result of her study of local history, Whitney wrote "A Portrait of Dr. Georgia Arbuckle Fix," a presentation about the life of a pioneer doctor in western Nebraska. During the 1970s and 1980s, Whitney authored numerous reviews, articles, and poems. Several of these writings were published in *The Living Church* between 1978 and 1990. She has written

non-religious poetry, including a poem dedicated to her late husband which is published in the Foreword of *With Joy Our Spirits Sing: The Hymns of Rae E. Whitney*. She serves as the newsletter editor for two retirement communities in Scottsbluff and Gering, Nebraska, including the community where she resides. Whitney also serves on the editorial board of the Bosom Buddies Network, a newsletter published by Regional West Medical Center for women who have experienced breast cancer.

### **Historical Significance and Context**

Rae E. Whitney's writing bears the influence of decades of change within the Episcopal Church and the American cultural landscape. Her particular interests in the roles of women in the church and society, mission, and ecumenism have provided foundational material for her hymn writing.

In her lifetime, Whitney has witnessed remarkable changes in the Episcopal Church – a transformation from the complete exclusion of women from liturgical roles to a modern period when women's ministries have been acknowledged and welcomed. During most of Whitney's life, women were not allowed any liturgical function in Nebraska parishes. The Reverend Clyde Whitney started a girls' choir in their parish in Scottsbluff, which was considered controversial in the 1960s. Rae Whitney clearly remembers receiving the chalice from a woman for the first time during Communion at the ECW Triennial in 1973. Even in that decade, Whitney recalls that diocesan lay readers' licenses in Nebraska still contained a disclaimer stating that "in remote areas where no man is available, a woman may conduct morning prayer." The Bishop of Nebraska refused to

license Rae Whitney as a lay reader and chalice bearer in the 1970s because she was a woman, but the Bishop of Wyoming agreed to do so, allowing Whitney to assist her husband in his supply work at parishes in that diocese. She finally was licensed in both roles in Nebraska in 1981 – again, so that she could assist her husband, who was serving as an interim rector in a small congregation.

Rae Whitney maintains that she never consciously tried to write “from a woman’s point of view.” Rather, she states that her writing is shaped by her religious faith, her experiences, her reading, and a deep “need” to write. She has frequently chosen to write about women: women of the Bible, women saints, and feminine images of God.

Whitney’s groundbreaking texts on these subjects have illuminated topics previously ignored by hymn writers.

Some examples of Whitney’s published hymns that include women or feminine imagery are:

- “Myrrh-bearing Mary” – based on Whitney’s study of the Eastern Orthodox understanding of Mary as one of the “Myrrh-bearing Women” or “Myrrhophores”
- “Soon from the east of Paradise” – a paraphrase of a sixth century text where the Virgin Mary speaks to the child Jesus and feminine imagery of the Lamb of God giving birth is used
- “Weeping, my tears filled with love, joy and shame” – explores Jesus’ encounters with several women in the gospels

- “O woman, O woman, O why are you weeping?” – a conversation between Jesus and Mary ending with Jesus' command for her to "go tell all my people" about his resurrection
- “The mother, Rachel, Jacob’s wife” – a hymn that includes Rachel, Ruth and Naomi in relation to Mary’s giving birth to Jesus
- “They came to his birthing” – implies the presence of both men and women throughout Jesus’ life and ministry, with women specifically mentioned at the resurrection
- “They have no wine said Mary” – Mary’s voice is heard in this hymn about Jesus’ miracles
- “I’ve wanted to gather you into my arms” – uses Jesus’ image of a hen gathering her brood under her wings (Matthew 23:37, Luke 13:34)
- “Dorcas lived her life in Joppa” – tells the story of a woman in the Bible, describing her ministry of hospitality and service
- “In Joppa lived a saint of God” – another hymn on the same topic
- “Lord, at Bethany two sisters” – refers to Mary and Martha
- “There lived in Alexandria” – tells the story of St. Katherine (Catherine)
- “Woman bent double” – begins with the biblical image of a crippled woman who was healed by Jesus (Luke 13:10-17), but identifies with all oppressed women
- “Young Mary lived in Nazareth” – the story of Mary’s pregnancy from her point of view

- “Break open the jar in the presence of Jesus” – based on the gospel story of an anonymous woman who anoints Jesus (Matthew 26:6-13, Mark 14:3-9, Luke 7:36-50), the hymn speaks of the priceless gifts of all women
- “Lord, don’t you care?” – a song about Martha
- “My soul proclaims God’s greatness” – a metrical paraphrase of the *Magnificat* (The Song of Mary)
- “I will sing a song of splendor” – also based on the *Magnificat*
- “Come, sing with Deborah!” – names Deborah, Miriam, and Sarah, then describes how women and men are created in God’s image
- “It was very costly” – describes the costliness of discipleship, including examples of Biblical women
- “Sing a song of Mary” – a narrative of Mary’s life

Whitney has also written hymns about women’s ordination:

- “Who better than Mary his mother can say” – based on a quotation from Mother Teresa: “Who better than Mary can say, “Take, eat, this is my body; this is my blood?”
- “Who said, ‘This is my body, flesh of my own flesh?’” – a later, more refined hymn based on this same quotation
- “We are called to follow Jesus” – written for the ordination of a deacon
- “Break open the jar in the presence of Jesus” – written to commemorate the ordination of women in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

In light of hymnal editors' current interest in texts about and written by women, one questions why more of Whitney's hymns have not been selected for use in Episcopal hymnals and supplements. Although she submitted a number of hymns to the text committee for *The Hymnal 1982*, she did not initially receive a response. As a result of ongoing correspondence with Boone Porter, several of her hymns were published in *The Living Church*, and one of her hymns served as the theme for the Episcopal Church Women Triennial in Denver in 1979. Porter wrote to Raymond Glover recommending Whitney's hymns; in response, Glover wrote to Whitney inviting her to submit hymns for consideration for inclusion in *The Hymnal 1982*. (Glover was apparently unaware that she had already submitted hymns.) As the hymnal text committee members finished their work, Whitney was informed that they were interested in two of her hymns – "St. Andrew was a fisherman" and "Lord God, you now have set your servant free." The committee insisted that the word "fisherman" and the phrase "to catch not fish, but men" be changed to inclusive language in order for the hymn to be used. Whitney felt it was impossible to make these changes without damaging other parts of the text, so the hymn was ultimately rejected. The committee also asked for two changes in "Lord God, you now have set your servant free:" 1) changing "the glory of your people and its light" to "the glory of your people and their light;" 2) changing "trapped in darkest night" to "wrapped in darkest night." Whitney agreed to the first change but insisted on keeping her original language in the second case. The committee finally agreed, and the revised hymn was accepted.

When *Wonder, Love and Praise*, the Episcopal Church's hymnal supplement, was developed, the committee did not request any texts from Whitney. She did not see a call

for submissions and therefore did not submit any texts. Whitney recalls conversations among prominent members of the Hymn Society expressing disappointment that they had not been involved in the process of creating the hymnal supplement. Although some leaders in Episcopal church music circles maintain that Whitney's use of masculine and traditional language renders her work unusable or outdated, such statements illustrate a lack of familiarity with the breadth of Whitney's writing.

Another aspect of Whitney's life that has influenced her writing is her interest in mission. As the twentieth century progressed, more Americans were able to travel internationally and engage in church mission work. This led to greater awareness within the church of issues facing the global community. Spending a year in Guatemala gave Whitney a deeper understanding of the economic disparities that exist between Americans and persons in developing countries.

We felt like the minority we were – but even though we personally had little money and were living on Clyde's church pension and his Social Security, we were wealthy to people whose average salary was \$1 a day, and as we watched the trash collectors spreading the contents on a tarp at each dwelling - and salvaging so much that was junk/trash to us – we felt shame at the waste we knew back home. Indeed, the culture shock hit when we came back to the States.

Although Whitney was not writing hymns during the time she lived in Guatemala, her experiences were eventually woven into the fabric of her poetry. An example of this influence is seen in "Empty is the manger," a hymn which addresses themes of poverty, hunger, disease, and greed:

Empty is the manger,  
empty is the tomb,  
empty is the garden,  
and the upper room;  
once they gave Christ shelter,

now he reigns above,  
and desires no dwelling  
save in hearts of love.

Empty is the pantry,  
empty is the purse,  
empty is the belly,  
breasts too dry to nurse.  
millions wander, hungry,  
many die at birth,  
lacking deeds of mercy  
from this affluent earth.

Empty is the spirit,  
empty is the mind,  
empty of compassion –  
hearts no longer kind.  
people wander, aimless,  
swamped by useless toys,  
eyes enticed by baubles,  
ears entranced with noise.

Empty is the manger,  
empty is the tomb,  
empty is the garden  
and the upper room,  
for the Risen Savior  
reigns with God above,  
and his Holy Spirit  
dwells in hearts of love.

*(With Joy Our Spirits Sing, 14)*

Like many of the best hymn writers of her generation, Whitney's hymns address themes of ecology, stewardship of God's creation, social justice, and peace. These themes are consistent with the increasing global awareness of these issues, especially since the 1960s.

Finally, the ecumenical movement that grew throughout the twentieth century profoundly impacted Whitney's writing. Her involvement in ecumenical work, which began as a

young adult, has continued throughout her life through organizations such as Church Women United, the Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius, the Hymn Society of Great Britain and Ireland, and the Hymn Society of the United States and Canada. The advent of the internet has allowed Whitney and others like her to communicate with like-minded persons around the world on ecumenical matters. Many ecumenical leaders now believe that the future of the movement lies in local, grass roots action, and Rae Whitney's work certainly reinforces that observation. Although she follows ecumenical matters at a national and international level, her weekly work leading an ecumenical Bible study group allows her to live out her passion in her local community. Whitney shares the following anecdote:

Two people in our community were overheard talking. One said, "Rae Whitney teaches a ladies' class at the Presbyterian Church." "Oh," said the other, "I thought she was an Episcopalian." The first replied, "Oh, I think she belongs to all the churches." I treasure that compliment!

A remarkably gifted and prolific hymn poet, Rae E. Whitney continues to break open jars of creativity and pour out her offerings for the church and the world.

### **The Project**

The practical component of this project consisted of a "Rae Whitney Celebration" held in Omaha, Nebraska on April 23-26, 2009. The celebration consisted of four events: a lecture by Whitney on April 23 at College of Saint Mary; a workshop presented by Whitney at Trinity Episcopal Cathedral on April 25; the premiere of a new hymn commissioned for Trinity Episcopal Cathedral on Sunday morning, April 26; a hymn

festival featuring musical settings of Whitney's text, including two newly composed anthems, on Sunday afternoon, April 26. Additionally, a smaller choral ensemble traveled to Scottsbluff, Nebraska and performed the hymn festival program at St. Francis Episcopal Church, Whitney's home parish, on May 1, 2009. Additional performances were presented at The Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary Cathedral in Grand Island, Nebraska, on May 2, 2009, and Holy Family Shrine, Gretna, Nebraska, on May 3, 2009.

The purposes of the project were as follows:

- to raise awareness of Whitney's work
- to present educational opportunities for local musicians, clergy, and laity
- to encourage creation of a new hymn by Whitney and newly composed musical settings of Whitney's texts
- to present, record, and film an excellent choral performance of settings of Whitney's texts
- to expose church musicians to these hymns and choral settings and encourage their use in parish settings
- to honor Whitney and her work at our diocesan cathedral

Funding for the project was secured by co-sponsorship by College of Saint Mary, the Omaha Chapter of the American Guild of Organists, and Trinity Episcopal Cathedral.

The hymn festival was presented through the support of the Morning Musicale Endowment at College of Saint Mary.

Work on the project began in 2008 by locating and purchasing copies of all published (including self-published) choral settings of Whitney's texts. These were reviewed and evaluated for musical quality and suitability for use in our hymn festival. This process resulted in the selection of eight published anthems to be performed in the festival. The decision was also made to commission one anthem from a nationally recognized composer. William Bradley Roberts, Associate Professor of Church Music at Virginia Theological Seminary in Alexandria, Virginia was selected to compose the anthem, and funding was secured for the commission. Michael McCabe, a nationally recognized composer living in Omaha, also offered his newly composed anthem setting of "May Your Life Be Filled with Gladness" for use at the festival. Finally, Edward Doemland, Whitney's colleague and collaborator, offered his jazz setting of "Lady, Who's That Little One" for our use.

One of the challenges of designing the festival was choosing twenty-two hymns from Whitney's five hundred published texts. Several criteria were used in selecting the hymns for the festival:

- Hymns for various seasons throughout the liturgical year
- Excellent and accessible hymns and anthems that would be useful in parish settings
- A variety of musical styles, including folk tunes, jazz, traditional hymn tunes, and newly composed settings
- Hymns ranging from Whitney's earliest writing to the present day
- Hymns that have gained wide acceptance in a variety of denominational hymnals

- Hymns that have not yet been set to music but are worthy of attention
- Examples of hymn poetry about Nebraska and the pioneer movement, in keeping with our college fine arts series' theme of "Celebrating the Arts in Nebraska"

This resulted in a balanced program of eleven choral compositions in a variety of styles, supplemented by three congregational hymns and eight hymn poems read by narrators.

In addition, we commissioned Whitney to write a new hymn for Trinity Episcopal Cathedral which would be sung on Sunday morning, April 26 and at the hymn festival.

At Whitney's request, I assembled and sent information on the cathedral's history and ministries in the community to be incorporated in the hymn.

The festival program consisted of the following hymns by Whitney:

- God of Hope and Joy and Wonder (commissioned for this occasion)
- The Lord Is My Savior
- Give Me a Sense of Sacredness
- If I Take the Wings of Morning
- Before the Earth Was Tossed in Space
- Christmas Has Its Cradle
- Lady, Who's That Little One
- Lord God, You Now Have Set Your Servant Free
- "They Have No Wine," Said Mary
- Sunday's Palms Are Wednesday's Ashes
- Teach Us to Laugh Amid Our Tears

- Grant to the Living, Grace
- Lord, I Am Searching
- Myrrh-Bearing Mary
- Times of Refreshing
- Travel Light Along the Way
- Without the Fire, There Is No Burning
- A Hymn to the Trinity (commissioned for this occasion)
- How Shining Are Those Sabbath Days
- My Home Is in Nebraska
- May Your Life Be Filled with Gladness (premiered on this occasion)
- Take Up the Song

As an illustration of the critical process used in selecting these hymns, here are examples of the application of the selection criteria to four of the chosen texts:

### **Myrrh-Bearing Mary**

1. Liturgical usefulness – This hymn is particularly appropriate for use throughout the Easter season; it is also suitable for general use and occasions celebrating women’s ministries. Whitney references the Eastern Orthodox tradition where Mary is known as one of the myrrh-bearing women or “Myrrhophores.” Scholars believe that tradition has fused several women into the biblical figure of Mary Magdalene; Whitney’s text illuminates these women.
2. Excellence and accessibility – The well-crafted musical setting by David Hurd can be used as a hymn or anthem; it is appropriate for women, men, mixed choirs,

- and children. (My college students chose this hymn as their favorite piece in the festival.)
3. Musical style – This is a representative example of David Hurd’s lyrical song style with a lush organ accompaniment.
  4. Date of composition – Written in 1981, this is one of Whitney’s earlier hymns.
  5. Availability – It appears in two hymnals (see previous chart), and it is also available in a popular anthem setting published by GIA.

### **Lord God, You Now Have Set Your Servant Free**

1. Liturgical usefulness – This hymn is a metrical paraphrase of *The Song of Simeon*, a canticle traditionally sung at Evening Prayer and useful throughout the liturgical year. The text is based on Luke 2:29-32. The hymn is suitable for singing by both congregations and choirs.
2. Accessibility – The metrical structure, paired with a traditional tune, provides a vehicle for teaching congregations to sing canticles.
3. Musical style – The hymn is set to *Song I* by Orlando Gibbons (1583-1625), a noted English composer of the Anglican choral tradition. The hymn can be sung with keyboard accompaniment or a cappella.
4. Date of composition – This is another early Whitney hymn, written in 1981.
5. Availability – As Whitney’s only hymn to appear in *The Hymnal 1982*, it is widely known and almost universally available in Episcopal churches. It also appears in *The Presbyterian Hymnal* (see previous chart).

### **Without the Fire, There Is No Burning**

1. Liturgical usefulness – The hymn is suitable for general use. The text expands on three lines of poetry by Thomas à Kempis and utilizes imagery from John’s gospel.
2. Accessibility – The use of repetition creates a unified structure that is easy for singers to grasp, yet the imagery and mysticism of the text continue to engage the imagination over time.
3. Musical style – The hymn is set to *Conway*, a tune composed in 1992 by contemporary American composer, David Ashley White. The hymn is also available in a SATB anthem setting by the composer, published by Selah Publishing Company.
4. Date of composition – The text was written in 1987, later in Whitney’s hymn writing career.
5. Availability – The anthem setting is readily available; the hymn can be reproduced with permission of Selah Publishing Company. ([www.selahpub.com](http://www.selahpub.com))

### **May Your Life Be Filled With Gladness**

1. Liturgical usefulness – The text is a grace-filled blessing, suitable for celebrations such as weddings, graduations, blessings, and baptisms.
2. Accessibility – The 87. 87 metrical structure of this text allows it to be paired easily with familiar hymn tunes. It is available in several anthem settings, including the new setting by Michael McCabe premiered at this hymn festival.

As previously mentioned, it was chosen as the text for a national composition contest and will be widely circulated in 2010.

3. Musical style – This hymn can be paired with a traditional tune such as *Stuttgart* or sung in a variety of anthem settings. McCabe’s 2008 composition features a lyrical melody, easy SATB part-writing, and optional instrumental parts for flute and oboe.
4. Date of composition – The hymn is one of Whitney’s newer texts, written in 1999.
5. Availability – One anthem setting is currently published; several others will be published within the next two years. The hymn can be reproduced with permission of Selah Publishing Company. ([www.selahpub.com](http://www.selahpub.com))

In November, 2008, I traveled to Scottsbluff, Nebraska to spend several days with Whitney discussing the details of the celebration. We clarified the focus of her lecture and workshop presentations, and we reviewed plans for the hymn festival. We conducted a telephone conference with her publisher, David Schaap of Selah Publishing Company, concerning copyright and synchronization licenses necessary for the festival. Whitney presented me with the first draft of the commissioned hymn, “God of hope and joy and wonder,” at this time. I also met with the Reverend Kelsey Hogue, rector of St. Francis Episcopal Church, regarding the presentation of the hymn festival program at his parish in the spring. I had the opportunity to see the nave and play the organ, making notes for our organist who would accompany the choir on tour. The Annual Council of the Diocese of Nebraska met in Scottsbluff the following weekend, and Whitney’s hymns

were used throughout the convention. Following the convention, we arranged a photo shoot to obtain publicity photos of Whitney in scenic outdoor settings near Scotts Bluff National Monument. I also had the privilege of visiting the Reverend Clyde Whitney's gravesite with Rae Whitney.

In December, the college's spring semester fine arts brochure was prepared for mailing in January, and information on the Rae Whitney Celebration was prominently featured. Information was also included in the college's magazine, *CSM Today*. Information was placed on the web sites of all three co-sponsoring organizations as well as the diocesan web site. A graphic artist in the cathedral parish designed posters and fliers which were posted throughout the community.

Weekly rehearsals for the hymn festival began in January, 2009. The festival would feature a large choir including members of the four choirs that I direct: the College of Saint Mary Chorus, the CSM Singers, Musica Sacra (a community chorus based at College of Saint Mary), and the Trinity Episcopal Cathedral Choir. Each choir spent several months working independently. The entire ensemble met for three combined rehearsals at the cathedral in preparation for the festival.

The spring semester included work on the concert program, obtaining necessary copyright permissions, numerous phone and email conferences with Whitney and Roberts, and arrangements for the choir tour to western Nebraska. Instrumental and vocal soloists were selected, and rehearsals were held with these musicians prior to the

combined choral rehearsals. Arrangements were made for video and audio recordings of the hymn festival.

After more than a year of planning and preparation, the celebration finally arrived. The lecture at College of Saint Mary allowed Whitney to discuss her approach to hymn writing in a presentation titled “My Life as a Hymn.” The lecture was part of the college’s Spring 2009 Fine Arts Series, “Celebrating the Arts in Nebraska.” The program was held in the Hillmer Art Gallery during an exhibit of works by women artists from Nebraska on loan from the Museum of Nebraska Art. We scheduled the Whitney lecture to coincide with the college’s Fine Arts Week and this art exhibition. We began the program with a book signing and coffee, followed by lunch. The CSM Campus Store organized a display of Whitney’s books, which were available for purchase. The event was attended by AGO members, students, faculty, staff, arts patrons, and members of the community. Whitney’s lecture presented her life’s story in the context of hymns. In consultation with Whitney, I designed a handout which was distributed to everyone in attendance. Whitney was assisted by Edward Doemland, who demonstrated musical examples at the piano. The program concluded with a period of questions from the audience.

The Saturday workshop at Trinity Episcopal Cathedral was geared toward church musicians and persons interested in church music. It consisted of two morning sessions in which Whitney presented her hymns, a lunch provided by the cathedral, and an afternoon session geared more specifically toward church musicians. Whitney discussed

her writing process and used hymns – including many from the next day’s hymn festival – as examples. She encouraged participants to sing and invited their input and questions. She was assisted by Edward Doemland, pianist. Doemland and Michael McCabe, composers, led participants in singing their anthems which would be performed at the hymn festival and discussed their approaches in composing these settings.

As a way of encouraging attendance by diocesan leaders, I worked with Sandra Squires, convener of the diocese’s Eastern Deanery, to offer the workshop as the program for the deanery’s April meeting. We planned for deanery representatives to attend the morning workshop sessions and lunch with the other workshop participants; at 1:00, the deanery representatives would move to another meeting room for their afternoon session.

However, the deanery representatives enjoyed the morning sessions so much that they agreed to meet over lunch and attend Whitney’s afternoon session as well. The Cathedral Shoppe was open throughout the day so that workshop participants could purchase Whitney’s books and have them signed.

Sunday morning, April 26, marked the premiere of a new Rae Whitney hymn, “God of hope and joy and wonder,” commissioned for Trinity Episcopal Cathedral. Whitney spoke to the congregation at the announcements, explaining how she had incorporated elements of the cathedral’s history into her text. The hymn was sung for the first time at the offertory. A reception and book signing followed the service, and parishioners had the opportunity to meet Whitney and discuss the new hymn.

Sunday afternoon, April 26, marked the final event of the celebration, the Rae Whitney Hymn Festival. The festival featured a large choir comprised of members of the College of Saint Mary Chorus, the CSM Singers, Musica Sacra (a community chorus based at College of Saint Mary), and the Trinity Episcopal Cathedral Choir. Each group spent most of the spring semester working independently on the music under my direction. The entire ensemble met for three combined rehearsals at the cathedral in preparation for the festival. The program incorporated congregational hymns, readings of Whitney's hymns and poems, and choral settings of Whitney's texts. Two new anthems were performed for the first time on this date: "A Hymn to the Trinity" by William Bradley Roberts and "May Your Life Be Filled with Gladness" by Michael McCabe. Roberts' anthem was commissioned specifically for the occasion by College of Saint Mary through a gift from Mary Ellen Mulcahy. McCabe, a local composer of national prominence, offered his anthem to be premiered at this performance. McCabe was present in the audience at the premiere. A video recording of the hymn festival is included with this document.

A printed program contained all of the texts used in the hymn festival as well as biographical information on Whitney, the composers, and the performers. The program allowed audience members to follow the texts and provided them with a "take home" reference for using the hymns and anthems in their own congregations.

The hymn festival was followed by a festive reception in the cathedral's Bishop Clarkson Center. Whitney's books were available for purchase in the Cathedral Shoppe, and Whitney was available to sign copies.

The project successfully met its goals by providing an outstanding series of educational and artistic events for the parish, the college, and the wider community. The following outcomes were noted:

- People throughout the diocese and the state became aware of Whitney's work
- Local musicians, clergy, laity, and college students benefited from educational opportunities
- Whitney's new hymn and two new anthem settings of her texts have been submitted for publication
- Local composers have been inspired to begin setting Whitney hymn texts; I have already received a copy of a composition based on a text used in the hymn festival
- Audio and video recordings of the hymn festival were made, and additional interview and performance footage from the festival and choir tour may form the basis of a future documentary film
- Church musicians discovered hymns and anthems that will be useful in their parish settings
- Whitney received well deserved recognition within her own diocese and state.

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