# Toward a Mennonite Eco-Hymnody

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*Abstract:* This article investigates expressions of the natural world found in English-language US Mennonite hymnals from 1902 to the present day, organizing these expressions into four categories: material-spiritual dualism, Romanticism, agrarianism, and justice. The article lays out how these categories have shifted over time, arriving at the environmental statements made in the most recent hymnal, *Voices Together*, and points to various framings to which Mennonites could look in order to strengthen their eco-theology.

## INTRODUCTION

There are ten official English-language hymnals of American Mennonites.[1] The General Conference (GC) published three: the 1894 *Mennonite hymnal, blending of many voices, prepared and arranged for use in the Mennonite Churches of the General Conference of North America*, the 1927 *Mennonite Hymn Book* (MHB), and the 1940 *Mennonite Hymnary* (MY). The 'Old' Mennonite Church (MC) published two: *Church and Sunday School Hymnal* (CSSH), originally released in 1902 and re-released with an additional supplement in 1911, followed by the 1927 *Church Hymnal*.[2] Following these, the MC and GC produced two joint hymnals, the 1969 *Mennonite Hymnal* (MH) and 1992 *Hymnal: A Worship Book* (HWB).[3] After

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[1] Canadian Mennonites significantly influenced these hymnals as well. Russian Mennonite immigrants to Canada profoundly shaped the Mennonite culture of singing. See Wesley Berg, *From Russia with Music* (Winnipeg, MB: Hyperion Press, 1985). The MC and GC were bi-national, consisting of churches in both the US and Canada; their hymnals represented all of these congregations. HWB and its supplements were published through MennoMedia as a joint publication of the MC and GC, even though the supplements were published after the formation of MCUSA and MCCanada. *Voices Together* continued this bi-national emphasis, as the committee consisted of seven US members and six Canadian members. The Church of the Brethren, too, has had an impact on some of these hymnals, particularly in the development of *Hymnal: A Worship Book*.

[2] *Mennonite Hymn Book* (Berne, IN: Mennonite Book Concern, 1927); *Mennonite Hymnary* (Berne, IN: Mennonite Book Concern, 1940); *Church and Sunday School Hymnal with Supplement*, ed. J. D. Brunk (Scottdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1911).

[3] *The Mennonite Hymnal* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1969); *Hymnal: A Worship Book* (Scottdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1992).

*Hymnal: A Worship Book*, the MC and GC merged to form MCUSA and MCCanada, through which the last three hymnals/supplements were published: *Sing the Journey* (STJ) in 2005, *Sing the Story* (STS) in 2007,[4] and in 2020 *Voices Together* (VT).[5]

For many US Mennonites, the texts of our hymns are arguably just as important as Scripture or the confession of faith. There is a potent, if indirect, link between hymn texts and Mennonite ethics.[6] What, then, do the hymnals say about our understanding of the natural world and our place in it? How has this relationship changed over the past century?[7] What does the 2020 hymnal, *Voices Together*, add to this conversation, and what does it point us toward? Below I will investigate the environmental and eco-theological statements in the texts of English-language US Mennonite hymnals of the past 120 years to see what impact these hymns have had on how Mennonites think about and interact with nature—both human and non-human nature.[8]

Why is such a study of US Mennonite eco-hymnody important? For one, it provides a new lens through which to analyze Mennonite history and relationship to creation. This is valuable for myriad reasons, perhaps most notably because of the Mennonite agricultural pedigree; some have posited that Mennonites are uniquely situated to voice opinions on climate due to their long and storied history of farming.[9] This relationship to the land shifted dramatically with the evolution of modern mechanized agriculture, which largely occurred within the span of the hymnals

[4] *Sing the Journey* (Scottdale, PA: Faith & Life Resources, 2005) and *Sing the Story* (Scottdale, PA: Faith & Life Resources, 2007) are supplements, not hymnals, and are outliers in my list. However, they are worth including because so much shaping of Mennonite eco-theology has taken place in the past thirty years or so. The two supplements are the best available resources for discerning how intentional thought regarding the natural world has taken shape in Mennonite hymnody.

[5] *Voices Together* (Harrisonburg, VA: MennoMedia, 2020).

[6] Some posit that the ethical value of music arises more from tunes than from text; in this essay, I focus on texts, as they provide a direct link to the specific images and ecological thought of the time of a hymnal's publication. For more on ethics in music, see Marcel Cobussen and Nanette Nielsen, *Music and Ethics* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013). For more on the relationship between hymns and ethics, see Nathan Myrick, *Music for Others: Care, Justice, and Relational Ethics in Christian Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

[7] When I use the term "Mennonite," I am specifically referring to US Mennonites that use official church hymnals. Most Mennonites worldwide, the majority of whom reside in the global south, do not use the hymnals I analyze. A number of Mennonites in North America also do not use these hymnals.

[8] As is noted in practically every environmentally focused essay, many terms referring to nature or the environment are loaded. I will use various words in order to avoid leaning too heavily upon any one term or interpretation. I am considering nature as all elements of earth, inclusive of humans and human-made spaces.

[9] Mel Schmidt, "The Mennonite Political Witness to the Care of Creation," in *Creation and the Environment: An Anabaptist Perspective on a Sustainable World*, ed. Calvin W. Redekop (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 103.

analyzed here. In addition, this study adds to the historical/anthropological literature on Mennonites—and does so in a way that to my knowledge has not been done before at this scale. People have looked at the hymnology of Mennonites and at Mennonite land ethics and eco-theology, but no literature has mapped them onto one another. As well, the study can contribute to the process of discerning where we want to go, to assess where we've been. It is a tool for reflection on a particular way that Mennonites have expressed their relationship to land.

Finally, the study reveals what respective hymnal committees saw as theologically relevant for the church at the time. The link between the texts of hymns and individual ethics is indirect, but that does not render it unimportant. Just because a hymn was chosen for inclusion in a hymnal does not mean that it was sung; however, hymnals as a whole are a theological statement—and, for my purposes, a historical landmark. The hymns analyzed here are not necessarily direct indicators of the popular beliefs of Mennonites in a given era, but rather are indicators of what ideas were available to them. If we cannot make direct ties between specific hymns and individual ethics, we can still infer how Mennonite ideas about the natural world as expressed in hymnody have evolved over time. This will give us historical context and a roadmap for framing environmental themes in the new *Voices Together* hymnal.

How is the meaning of a hymn determined? It cannot be exclusively or exactly located in the text or the tune; while these elements certainly perform a significant role in meaning-making, other elements are at play. The context of the creation of a hymn can flavor its reception; for example, the handbook to the 1940 *Mennonite Hymnary* largely serves to provide context for the hymns contained there. The way hymns are indexed in a hymnal adds another form of context. Hymns take on particular meanings in particular congregations and ways of worship, and individuals, too, find their own unique meanings in familiar hymns. Interpreting the meaning of a hymn is a complex endeavor. This essay's analytical scope is restricted to the text.

For nine of the selected hymnals, I investigated each hymn in search of metaphors and images of the natural world. I did not analyze the 1894 GC hymnal, which was simply a reprint of an existing non-Mennonite hymnal; even in those that I did look through, most of the hymns were not originally written by Mennonites but were adopted from other sources. However, these other hymnals were arranged and curated by a Mennonite committee, and therefore more clearly reflect the ideas of Mennonites of the time. Looking for key words and repeated themes, I found that the hymns could be roughly organized into four categories—material-

spiritual dualism, Romanticism, agrarianism, and justice.[10] My research was guided by these questions: (1) What is the relationship between the hymnodic traditions and environmental ethics of MCUSA and its antecedents? (2) What environmental and eco-theological statements are made in the latest hymnal, *Voices Together*, and (3) What impact could these statements have on the Mennonite church? I will provide examples of subthemes within each category and name some ways that these categories can overlap or interact with one another. Finally, I use the historical backdrop of how these expressions emerged and changed over time to analyze the ways that *Voices Together* frames creation.

By presenting a historical outline of these expressions, I hope to describe how the environmental imagination expressed in US Mennonite hymnals has evolved in the past 120 years. My work is a survey, covering broad topics with some details on specific hymns. It attempts to establish a rough map, a historical sketch. For further details and data, I have created a digital appendix containing my data and various other related resources.[11]

## MATERIAL-SPIRITUAL DUALISM

One core issue of Anabaptist eco-theology is material-spiritual dualism. This ideology reflects the call to "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world, embracing instead the thought of heaven."[12] While not inherently dangerous, this dualism at its worst frames earth and heaven as diametrically opposed, setting up heaven as a goal and earth as its obstacle; heaven as "above" and earth as "below." Positioning heaven and earth as antithetical easily lends itself to a devaluation of earth and all its contents.[13]

Material-spiritual dualism projects the Genesis story of the human fall onto the entire earth. By extending the implications of original sin beyond humanity, this dualism contends that the entirety of creation was made sinful in the human act of undermining God's will. The fallen earth

[10] These categories emerged organically during the process of analysis, but I also found inspiration in the typologies laid out in Willis Jenkins's *Ecologies of Grace* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008) and Peter Dula's explication of them in his essay "Anabaptist Environmental Ethics: A Review Essay" in *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 94, no. 1 (January 2020): 7–42, as well as those described in Jedediah Purdy's *After Nature: A Politics for the Anthropocene* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015).

[11] https://sustainableclimatesolutions.org/creation-hymns/.

[12] 1 John 2:15, KJV.

[13] How "world" is defined in this context tends to shift generationally. What is considered "worldly" to the audience of the *Church and Sunday School Hymnal* would differ from what is considered "worldly" by the audience of *Voices Together*. The meaning of "dualism" also shifts with time.

concept fails to distinguish a fallen humanity from its surroundings, putting all of non-human nature under the same umbrella of sin. This has unfortunate enviro-ethical consequences; we may believe a land ethic is not worth developing and maintaining if we consider the land being occupied as valueless and transient.

Material-spiritual dualism has a strong foothold in Mennonite hymnody. Earth is often depicted as a miserable, flawed place, whereas heaven is depicted as perfect and the true home of the Christian. The 1902 *Church and Sunday School Hymnal* is particularly prone to this depiction, focusing tightly on the pains and difficulties of earthly life and speaking almost giddily about the promises of heaven. It even goes so far as to allude to earth being morally equivalent to hell.[14] Entire sections (for example, hymns 135 to 165), are comprised nearly exclusively of hymns featuring dualistic statements.

One device used to denote heaven's perfection and earth's fallen status is to apply disparate natural imagery to earth and heaven: earth is described with thorns, storms, and deserts—metaphors for the "trials of life"[15]—whereas heaven is an Edenic natural space represented by flowers, fields, sunlight, and streams.[16] Some hymns also note the necessity of decay in earthly nature, setting it up in contrast to the everlasting nature of God.[17] These hymns contend that earth is, at least metaphorically, made up of the difficult elements of nature, while heaven is essentially the easy, comforting elements of nature.

Heaven is not solely depicted as a perfect *natural* space—it also is occasionally represented as a perfect *civilization*, a beautiful city providing protection from the dangers of natural or moral "wilderness." The city is a perfectly constructed space full of grand features,[18] and is surrounded by equally grand walls.[19] The theme of the walled city was emphasized in early hymnals, which were published at a time when the vast majority of Mennonites were rural farmers, and the difficulties associated with frontier and agrarian life would have been fresh in their minds. Wilderness was something to fear; it would not fully gain its Romantic connotations as a place for renewal and spiritual insight until the shift of

[14] CSSH 28, 254.

[15] CSSH 215, 219, 220, 388, 507; CH 164.

[16] CSSH 59, 130, 135, 142, 150, 154, 161, 162, 219, 304, 353, 388; CH 44, 46, 164, 631; MHB 147; MY 232; MH 556; HWB 606, 613.

[17] CSSH 293, 363, 372; CH 358; HWB 653; STJ 108.

[18] CSSH 135, 143, 144, 145, 153.

[19] CSSH 163, 164.

Mennonites into urban areas offered separation from the wild, allowing them to reflect upon it through a more abstract, aesthetic framing.[20]

As noted earlier, heaven is often alluded to as "home" for the Christian throughout Mennonite hymnody. Many hymns refer to Christians as strangers to earth, listless pilgrims in a place they do not belong.[21] Some pine for the perfect life of heaven.[22] Many remind the earthly Christians to distance themselves from "earthly things."[23] Some of these hymns are rather vitriolic: "Love Not the World" (CSSH 385) demands a complete disavowal of earth, charging "Love not the world! Its dazzling show Conceals a snare of death; / The sweetest joy earth can bestow, Dies as a wasted breath." These trains of thought have distinctly lessened in recent hymnals but are still present: expressions of dualism are resilient because they are deeply embedded in the idea of heaven.

Other elements of Christian belief are also used to present a spirituality superior to materiality. Some hymns do this by applying flowery natural imagery to the Bible (or God's "Word" more broadly) or the church.[24] Earthly biblical landmarks are used as metaphors for heaven: Jerusalem, Canaan, and the Jordan River are frequent candidates.[25] Many hymns allude to Christians as pilgrims in a desert or wilderness, evoking the Exodus story (and Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*).[26] These biblical images complexify dualism; it is worth minimizing the footprint of dualism in our hymnals, but we cannot easily do away with biblical images baked into the Christian imagination.

Several hymns scattered throughout Mennonite hymnody contain statements that intentionally or unintentionally undermine material-spiritual dualism in potentially fruitful ways. One example is the hymnic arrangements of the Lord's Prayer present in nearly every hymnal.[27] The call that "thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven" is a strong eco-theological statement that may counter dualism: it suggests accountability for earth as much as heaven. This likely was not given intentional thought in early hymnals, but more recent hymnals clearly have taken note of this line and its implications: hymn 57 of *Sing the Journey*, titled "Mayenziwe

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[20] For a non-Anabaptist framing of this idea, see Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Idea in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964).

[21] CSSH 139, 147, 306, 450, 462; MHB 267, 344; HWB 8, 463, 502, 514.

[22] CSSH 239, 306; CH 498.

[23] CSSH 34, 56, 166, 174, 269, 385; CH 153, 363; MY 257, 351; MH 329; STJ 45.

[24] CSSH 17, 194, 429; CH 52; MH 218.

[25] CSSH 65, 74; CH 630; MY 262, 263; HWB 14, 610.

[26] CSSH 65, 124, 132, 224, 309.

[27] CSSH 238, CH 657, MY 610, HWB 228, STJ 48, STS 42.

(Your Will Be Done)" simply repeats the line "Your will be done on earth, O Lord."

What qualifies as a strong environmental statement must be considered within the ideological framework of the time of its publication. Even timid counters to dualism hold weight in early hymnals. In the 1902 *Church and Sunday School Hymnal*, the few gentle affirmations of nature feel more powerful than in later hymnals because of the widespread dualism that surrounds them; they offer a welcome respite from the sweeping denigrations of earth found throughout the book. "O Love Divine" (CSSH 419) suggests that, in the face of grief, we can find solace through seeing God in the natural elements: "When drooping pleasure turns to grief, / And trembling faith is changed to fear, / The murm'ring wind, the quiv'ring leaf, / Shall softly tell us, thou art near." Placing the presence of God within the natural elements, though subtle, chips away at the idea that earth is devoid of spiritual value.

More recently, select hymns make an intentional effort to ensure earth is not devalued absolutely. These began to emerge in the 1969 *Mennonite Hymnal*, with such examples as "Let All the World" (MH 22), which reminds singers that "The earth is not too low; / His praises there may grow," and "The Savior Died, But Rose Again" (MH 268), which points to Christ's combining of the immanent and the transcendent as a "sacred chain that binds / the earth to heav'n above." Both of these clearly state a connection between earth and heaven.[28] This tempering of dualism generally does not seem to be an intentional effort to improve the eco-theology of hymnals, but rather a side effect of reinterpreting the value of non-conformity. Whereas classic Mennonite non-conformity shuns worldliness in design, entertainment, and politics, this reinterpretation encourages stronger involvement in political and humanitarian activity. Mennonites who embrace this train of thought non-conform by voicing an alternative perspective within existing political and social systems rather than by fully disengaging.

Dualistic expressions that devalue earthly life are ethically complex. They can diminish a community's understanding of the need for a healthy land ethic, but they can also function as an argument for frugal living and placing limits on consumption. "Come, Holy Spirit, Heavenly Dove" (CH 153) clearly shows the frugal side of the coin, sneering at materialism: "Look, how we grovel here below, / Fond of these earthly toys; / Our souls, how heavily they go, / To reach eternal joys." Dualism, then, can be

[28] Hymns such as "How Great Thou Art" (MH 535) also helped fight the devaluation of earth pushed in earlier dualistic hymns. I explore this further in the Romanticism section below.

a tool for emphasizing non-conformity to capitalism and a culture of consumption.

Despite these positive potentials, the eco-theological impact of material-spiritual dualism is largely negative. To tweak a statement by William Cronon, "by imagining that our true home is in the [dualistic conception of heaven], we forgive ourselves the homes we actually inhabit."[29] If we believe the earth is not our home, we find ourselves under no obligation to take care of it. In his essay "The Transfigured Earth: Bioregionalism and the Kingdom of God," Jonathan McCray paraphrases Wendell Berry, noting that "most American Christians have no place to lay their heads; they are eternal strangers to their landscapes because their only Holy Land is one they may never see. . . . For many of us, earth is just dirt, static and inert, something to be wiped from our shoes. We forget that earth is *soil*, humming with organisms and complex horizons."[30] This is precisely the issue with making a dualism of the material and the spiritual, with depicting the earth as fallen and inherently flawed. To operate under the belief that our residency on earth does not matter and is not true to our being is to brush over the complexity and vivacity of our natural world, and potentially to cause significant harm in the process. Harmful iterations of this dualism pose fundamental problems to the development of an Anabaptist eco-theology (and therefore eco-hymnody). We must recognize the potential repercussions of singing such theology, and find ways to move beyond such dualism in the establishment of a stronger eco-hymnody.

## ROMANTICISM

Romanticism is the second theme strongly represented in much of US Mennonite hymnody. "Romanticism" is a notoriously fuzzy term. My own definition is strongly influenced by Jedediah Purdy's framing of Romanticism, which centers on the belief that "a key part of the world's value is aesthetic and spiritual, found in the inspiration of mountain peaks, sheer canyon walls, and deep forests."[31] The Romantic movement emerged in response to the Industrial Revolution of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, and advocated for a glorification and spiritualization of pristine nature alongside an emphasis on individualism and emotion. The Romantics believed in a "truth beneath the surface of

[29] The original form of this quotation is from William Cronon's 1995 essay, "The Trouble with Wilderness," *The New York Times Magazine*, August 13, 1995, https://www.nytimes.com /1995/08/13/magazine/the-trouble-with-wilderness.html.

[30] Ched Myers, ed., *Watershed Discipleship: Reinhabiting Bioregional Faith and Practice* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2016), 64.

[31] Purdy, *After Nature*, 8.

nature," a numinous element that runs through the non-human world and is available for interpretation by any human that chooses to pay attention.[32] In Mennonite hymnals of the past half-century, this concept holds a noteworthy presence.

Romanticism was initially slow to emerge in the hymnals. The earliest one I analyzed, the 1902 *Church and Sunday School Hymnal*, contained very few Romantic expressions outside of harvest hymns (which I will address later), in keeping with its emphatic embrace of dualistic theology. However, subsequent hymnals increasingly represented Romanticism, reflecting the general migration of the populace toward urban areas throughout the course of the twentieth century. By the 1970s, approximately one-third of American Mennonites lived in places with populations exceeding 2,500.[33] This migration allowed those adopting an urban life to perceive non-human nature through an aesthetic framing in place of a more immediate perception of nature held by those living in rural areas and working the land.

Signs of this shift are evident as early as the preface to the 1927 *Church Hymnal*, which is notably more Romantic than its predecessor. It mentions that "heaven and earth are full of His [God's] praises," and labels music and poetry as "the language of the soul," sentiments that one would have been hard-pressed to find in the 1902 hymnal.[34] This sentiment gained further footing through many subsequent hymnals, peaking in the 1969 *Mennonite Hymnal*. It is clear that the committees for these hymnals, even from the relatively early years, held an awareness and intentional focus on Romanticism. The handbook to the 1940 *Mennonite Hymnary* describes "Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee" (MY 10):

> A nature hymn of the first order, written by one who himself had a profound appreciation and love of the out-of-doors. The words from beginning to end are an expression of the beauty in nature and the resulting joy and spirit of praise it brings to the worshipper.[35]

This open Romanticism pervades much of twentieth-century Mennonite hymnody.

Romantic expressions in the hymnals primarily comprise various types of simple calls to praise God for the beauty of nature. These praise hymns

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[32] "Notable Books in Brief Review: John Muir's Account of His Historic Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf, and Other Recent Publications," *New York Times* (January 21, 1917), BR4, quoted in Purdy, *After Nature*, 131.

[33] Royden Loewen and Steven M. Nolt, *Seeking Places of Peace: A Global Mennonite History* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2012), 108.

[34] *Church Hymnal*, v.

[35] Lester Hostetler, "Handbook to the Mennonite Hymnary," (Newton, KS: General Conference of the Mennonite Church of North America, 1949), 7.

are worth noting as much for their sheer quantity as for their theological and ethical content. Perhaps the most famous of these (and also one of the most eloquently and Romantically stated) is "For the Beauty of the Earth" (CH 582, MH 58, HWB 120), viewed by many Mennonites as an environmental anthem.[36] The general formula for these praise hymns, as evident in this example, is to offer a brief Romantic depiction of a facet of the non-human world followed by a call for Christians to respond with praise. Consider "Mighty God, While Angels Bless Thee" (CH 34) and "O God, I Thank Thee For Each Sight" (CH 198), among others.[37] This theme of Romantic praise persisted and expanded, like other classically Romantic expressions, until the publication of *Hymnal: A Worship Book* (1992), when it began to wane.

Many hymns similarly call for non-human nature, or creation as a whole, to praise God. Though usually stated only in passing, hymns of this type take an important step in giving agency to all of creation—not only humans are capable of praising God.[38] This idea is deeply embedded in Mennonite hymnody. We need to look no further than the line "praise Him all creatures here below" from the stalwart "Praise God from Whom (Dedication Anthem)." Some hymns take this idea in a slightly different direction, emphasizing that simply the existence and beauty of elements of non-human nature are their own form of simultaneous gift from, and praise to, God.[39] Early expressions of this helped pave the way for the eco-justice and stewardship of later hymnals.

Romanticism lends itself to a sort of panentheism that emerges with increasing frequency in the course of American Mennonite hymnody. Panentheism locates God simultaneously within and beyond the elements of the material world. Panentheistic ideas and images are present from the beginning of the hymnody, with several expressions drawn from Scripture appearing in the 1902 *Church and Sunday School Hymnal*. These hymns depict God, or facets of God, in the form of various natural elements: God is metaphorically portrayed as a rock,[40] as a body of water,[41] and is also frequently depicted as "Light," often with imagery of a sunrise and sometimes portraying the Light of God being cast upon each individual element of creation in the form of the rising Sun.[42] Many hymns

[36] Despite its Mennonite "anthem" status, this hymn—along with most hymns cited in this essay—was not written by Mennonites.

[37] CH 18; MHB 186; MY 51, 368; MH 13, 34, 50, 58, 267, 518, 523, 526, 535; HWB 154, 156.

[38] CSSH 30, 347; CH 17, 21, 62, 125, MHB 54, 186; MY 49; MH 5, 20, 27, 28, 30, 36, 46, 51, 52, 56, 59, 62, 101, 104, 105, 122, 127, 204, 493, 534, 536, 594; HWB 48, 49, 51, 118; STJ 14; STS 18, 109.

[39] CH 20, 41, 132; MHB 54; MY 70, 403, 407; MH 10, 49, 50, 54, 55; HWB 47; STJ 24, 116.

[40] CSSH 72, 312, 319, 447, 458; STJ 28.

[41] CH 292, 449, 521; MH 287.

[42] CSSH 206, 469, 471; CH 173, 176, 197.

also simply note God's general presence in, or influence upon, creation.[43] Again, these images are biblical in origin. Hymns that focus on the Holy Spirit also tend to be quite lyrically mystical, and are often presented through natural metaphors, employing dynamic natural elements such as water, wind, and fire.[44] Many of these natural images persist in later hymnody. Though likely not intentionally panentheistic or enviro-ethical in tone, at least in earlier hymnals, these expressions paved the way for more overtly panentheistic statements in their successors.

Indeed, panentheistic expressions blossom in recent hymnals. Elements begin to emerge in *The Mennonite Hymnal*, with God represented as an ambient force permeating the world; "Wise Men Seeking Jesus" (MH 468) emphasizes the classic Romantic conception of nature as a cathedral with God as an undercurrent spreading through it, stating:

> Prayerful souls may find Him
> By our quiet lakes,
> Meet Him on our hillsides
> When the morning breaks.

*Hymnal: A Worship Book* brought panentheism more strongly into hymnody, holding multiple hymns that announce panentheistic ideas.[45]

Romanticism is an ethically complicated pattern of thought. Though it played an important role in the evolution of eco-theology within Mennonite hymnody by stating that the natural world held value, its locating value in natural beauty tends to devalue nature's less beautiful elements. Its emphasis on aesthetic value is at odds with the ecological importance of many of these so-called lesser spaces. A swamp may lack the aesthetic charisma of a mountain valley, but it holds significant ecological value for its interception of runoff and the habitat it supplies for myriad species. Aesthetics are by no means a sufficient system of judgment for which areas deserve attention and conservation; unimpressive spaces are just as important as their more dramatic counterparts. By singing hymns that place disparate value upon various elements of creation, we perform a theology of selective disdain for myriad spaces and species of ecological importance. This is ecologically unconscionable; the health of the whole is a product of the interlinking health of each individual component. "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me. . . ."[46]

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[43] CSSH 84; CH 48; MHB 183; MY 52, 60, 139.

[44] HWB 31.

[45] HWB 83, 97, 104, 298, 325.

[46] Matt. 25:40, NIV.

## AGRARIANISM

The next theme strongly represented throughout much of American Mennonite hymnody is agrarianism. Mennonites of European descent have long been known for their farming pedigree. Early European Mennonites, for example, notably drained the swamps surrounding the Vistula River in Poland, converting it into highly productive farmland, as well as developing remarkable agricultural colonies in Southern Russia at the invitation of Catherine the Great.[47] They used progressive farming techniques lauded for their positive impact on soil health: crop rotation and natural fertilizers, namely animal manure and legumes.[48]

Mennonite farmers were good stewards of their soil, likely for a handful of reasons. E. K. Francis, a Catholic sociologist, argued in a 1952 essay that Mennonites framed farming as a "way of life," and found joy in "work well done, from the improvement and increase of [their] holdings and herds, and from the knowledge of having provided for future generations."[49] Mennonites prioritized stewardship of their land, at least in part, as a result of placing value upon doing good work and crafting a sustainable environment for their successors. Mennonite environmental thought of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries generally centered on humility in relation to the natural world: agrarian simplicity, eschewing "technological pride" in methods of farming, and avoiding using things "created by the Lord" for self-indulgent purposes.[50]

Despite this apparent care for the earth, there were several noteworthy issues with the way Mennonites thought about and interacted with the environment. A certain degree of anthropocentrism was embedded in their relationship to their land: the rationale behind their land ethic was to preserve the instrumental value of their soil for their children, not for its own inherent value. Mennonite farmers also tended to focus only on *their* land and missed some of the complexity of their relationship to the broader environment in doing so. Royden Loewen notes the discrepancy between the strong relation to the land—Mennonites were "the quintessential farmers [that] imbued life-on-the-land with religious meaning"—and apparent lack of interest in more abstract knowledge about the environment and environmental history.[51] A strict focus on agrarian philosophy and superior farming methods risked overlooking

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[47] Calvin W. Redekop, *Creation and the Environment: An Anabaptist Perspective on a Sustainable World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 72.

[48] Redekop, *Creation and the Environment*, 73.

[49] Redekop, *Creation and the Environment*, 83.

[50] Royden Loewen, "The Quiet on the Land: The Environment in Mennonite Historiography," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 23 (2005): 155.

[51] Loewen, "The Quiet on the Land," 151.

the ecological impact Mennonite farmers could have beyond the boundaries of their fields, as well as the social impacts of their methods and locations.[52]

Mennonite farming tactics were not significantly intentional in their environmentally friendly image, and this would become highlighted in the cultural shifts brought about during the twentieth century. State-of-the-art agricultural technology was adopted by many more Mennonites than before, largely due to shifts in the cost of living and the economic viability of animal-powered subsistence agriculture. Farming became less of a lifestyle and more of a business.[53] In his essay in *Creation and the Environment: An Anabaptist Perspective on a Sustainable World*, Walter Klaassen rather scathingly concluded that "we [as Mennonites] have done no thinking about the resources of our tradition of nonviolence in the human war against mother nature," and even in history "it was the need to survive and not love of the land that produced the expertise and care of the land for which Mennonites became famous."[54]

Reflective of this long and complex agricultural tradition, many Mennonite hymnals have made extensive use of agrarian imagery. The most prevalent and straightforward instances are the harvest hymns, which offer thanksgiving for God's providence. In early hymnals, this is practically the only type of hymn that paints the earth in a positive light. These hymns primarily target bountiful harvest years, romanticizing the process and fruits of organic growth.[55] Numerous hymnals also contain a hymn noting that God is still present and worthy of thanksgiving even in lackluster harvest years.[56] Other hymns simply give thanks to God for enabling God's followers to farm.[57] Still others appeal to Psalmic metaphors that use agricultural images, i.e., God as a shepherd or gardener.[58] The image of Christ as "the Lamb" also appears.[59]

A significant number of hymns have used the metaphor of agriculture to offer calls to proselytizing. These hymns are often indistinct from general harvest hymns. They use the same imagery, alluding to the "Word of God"' as a seed to be planted and cultivated in others, or referring to non-Christians as grain to be gathered.[60] Some of these hymns are more explicit than others; some name the idea of cultivating Christians, while

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[52] Loewen and Nolt, *Seeking Places of Peace*, 91.

[53] Redekop, *Creation and the Environment*, 74–75.

[54] Redekop, *Creation and the Environment*, 153.

[55] CSSH 20, 58, 256; CH 572, 575, 576, 577; MH 360, 521.

[56] CSSH 131; MH 525; HWB 92.

[57] CSSH 438; CH 574.

[58] CSSH 83, 117, 219.

[59] CSSH 12, 13.

[60] CSSH 8, 332, 333, 334, 337, 483, 528; CH 352; MY 406.

others only casually allude to it or make no reference at all to their missionary quality.[61] These can only be noted as mission hymns due to their placement in the 'Mission' section of hymnals or from other context clues outside the hymn text itself.

Some hymns calling Christians to agrarian livelihood are ambiguous enough to potentially have been intended literally.[62] These call-to-agrarian work hymns slowly evolve throughout the chronology of hymnals to point more to a call for general good work, suggesting that all livelihoods are capable of Christly interpretation, likely another repercussion of the gradual shift of Mennonites toward urban areas.[63]

Agrarian expressions in Mennonite hymnody waned as the twentieth century drew to a close. *Hymnal: A Worship Book* (1992) did not contain a specific 'harvest' section, as some previous hymnals had; its supplements, *Sing the Journey* and *Sing the Story*, contained essentially no explicitly agricultural hymns. It is valuable for the Mennonite agricultural tradition to maintain a presence in hymnody, both for the importance of maintaining awareness of our tradition and for the strength of its environmental imagery.

While certainly not without its flaws, the agrarian pedigree provides an opportunity for Mennonites to speak strongly on environmental matters. Some veins of the community have embraced this, but others have offered ongoing resistance. Mennonites have historically been divided on the issue of political involvement. While some branches of the church have pushed various missions and aid programs, others have entrenched themselves in the historic Mennonite self-identification as *die Stillen im Lande*—the quiet in the land—refraining from political involvement. This apoliticism stems from the long-standing Mennonite value of non-conformity, born of centuries of religious persecution and developed upon the idea of removal from "the world." Though there are certainly some ways non-conformity can be used to positive moral (and environmental) ends, opting to stay silent on political issues arguably is not one of these positive manifestations.

## ETHICS AND JUSTICE

The publication of the 1969 *Mennonite Hymnal* marked the emergence of a theme new to the hymnals: justice. Justice is a broad term; for my purposes it refers to a desire for equitable treatment of human and non-human beings. Initially, justice hymns were strongly socially oriented:

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[61] CSSH 325, 332, 333; CH 525.

[62] CSSH 336; CH 168.

[63] MHB 270.

justice in *The Mennonite Hymnal* was represented by a short "Social Justice" section seemingly geared towards civil rights.[64] Nearly a half-century would pass before any direct environmental note would be made in a justice hymn in the hymnals. *The Mennonite Hymnal* also introduced a section on "Stewardship," appealing to the call for creation care (Genesis 2). This section included hymns that were more immediately environmental in content than their broader justice counterparts. Numerous hymns appealed to a utilitarian call for healthy resource management and reminded Mennonites that all of creation belongs to God and is only entrusted to humanity temporarily.[65] "We Give Thee But Thine Own" (MH 364) states this clearly:

> We give Thee but Thine own,
> Whate'er the gift may be:
> All that we have is Thine alone,
> A trust, O Lord, from Thee.

Later hymnals would continue the representation of stewardship hymns, often melding them with mystic expressions of Romanticism.[66] Some stewardship hymns are tied to the Mennonite history of agrarian relationship to the land.[67]

The hymnals that succeeded the *Mennonite Hymnal* further emphasized justice and environmental ethics. *Hymnal: A Worship Book* (1992) embraced the broader concept of justice but was tentative about making any explicitly environmental statements. Ken Nafziger, music editor for HWB, noted in conversation that the committee for the hymnal was wary of using any explicit images of particular environmental issues out of concern that they may not age well; climate crises evolve, and the science and ideas emphasized in relation to climate work change as well. The environment was primarily regarded in the "Creation" section of the hymnal, which used Romantic tropes and heart songs to paint the natural world as worthy of praise. The natural world *is* worthy of praise—but its degradation is worthy of mention as well. HWB does contain *some* passing mentions of environmental issues. Some of the more general justice hymns use images of these issues to emphasize humanitarian issues—destruction of the natural world is noted as a major side effect of war,[68] and poor resource management is labeled as a cause of famine and poverty.[69]

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[64] MH 459.

[65] MH 360, 364, 365; HWB 386.

[66] HWB 57.

[67] HWB 90.

[68] HWB 372.

[69] HWB 142.

Though subtle, the mentions of environment in the justice hymns of HWB were early inklings of emerging eco-hymnody.

The HWB supplements *Sing the Journey* (2005) and *Sing the Story* (2007) were both strongly justice-oriented. This is evident even from the preface of STS, which calls out "nationalism, high-tech warfare, terrorism, apathy toward environmental concerns, genocide, racism, sexism, over-consumption, and greed" as standing in opposition to the voice of Christ, and notably making an explicit comment on the importance of environment.[70] The supplements continued the general trends of expression found in HWB, stressing environmental concerns primarily to back up humanitarian issues.[71] Stewardship is represented marginally more than in *Hymnal: A Worship Book*, with a slim handful of hymns advocating for it. Frugality also sees representation; "Beauty for Brokenness" (STS 115) calls for an end to greed and asks God to "make us content with the things that we need," while the refrain to "Had God Brought Us Out" (STS 96) is simply a repetition of the Hebrew word for "enough." Outright environmental hymns were still scant.

Organizing an environmental ethic in hymnody requires, among other things, the development of a collection of hymns noting human responsibility for environmental degradation. HWB and its supplements took the important step of incorporating justice somewhat broadly into Mennonite hymnody, but their anthropocentric viewpoint and hesitancy to approach environmental issues undermined their ability to strongly express shifts in Mennonite eco-theology.

## VOICES TOGETHER

The year 2020 marked the release of a new Mennonite hymnal. *Voices Together* (VT) was developed out of a desire to bring Mennonite hymnody into harmony with a new generation of Mennonites. The VT website notes that, at the time of its publication, twenty-eight years had passed since the release of *Hymnal: A Worship Book.* It also states that "as worship rhythms develop new currents, the language of a recent generation needs to expand too."[72] As culture changes, so must hymnody. Facilitating this generational shift was a primary goal of the hymnal committee—allowing new ideas to percolate into Mennonite hymnody, providing a fresh melding of new and old in a way that hopefully can become established in the subconscious of a new generation.

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[70] *Sing the Story*, iii.

[71] *Sing the Journey*, 66.

[72] "History of the Project," http://voicestogetherhymnal.org/about/history-of-the-project/, accessed January 29, 2021.

Like many Mennonite hymnals, VT strives to appeal to all varieties of Mennonites. The FAQ page on the hymnal website comments on this broad approach: after posing the question of whether people will see their personal theology reflected in each hymn, the page remarks "likely not, as that is not the intent of a hymnal. Rather than a book for personal piety, a denominational hymnal represents the theological breadth of the church."[73] A broad theological approach allows a hymnal to explore new ideological territory while minimizing alienation of more traditionally-minded church members.

The FAQ also emphasizes the creedal quality of hymnals. It states that "there is no reason to make a new hymnal if it will be exactly the same as the current one. Part of the purpose of making a new hymnal is to reflect and amplify shifts happening in the church, in the lives of people, and in society."[74] VT, like other Mennonite hymnals, is not wholly revolutionary in its content. A bit more than half of the material in it was drawn from preceding Mennonite hymnals.[75] This being said, it is still significant that nearly half of the materials are new. Also worth noting is that this hymnal contains more work by Mennonite creators than any previous hymnal—a full 131 songs featured a text and/or tune by an Anabaptist contributor.[76]

*Voices Together* continues the push made by *Hymnal: A Worship Book* to use inclusive language. The committee adopted a moderate path on this issue, stating that they "tried to maintain balance—around topics including ability, geography, race, economic status, and gender—while also respecting the place of lived memory."[77] This hymnal is distinct in its performance of inclusivity, offering alternate texts under some hymns that have been altered, thus allowing for congregations to choose whether to use the inclusive texts.

There was a concerted effort by the committee to focus on how VT would depict the natural world. The preface alludes to this, commenting that "together in worship we are called and sent to live into God's vision of healing and hope not just for ourselves, but for our communities and *all of creation*."[78] Adam Tice, the text editor, has written numerous environmentally-focused hymns, and noted that VT aimed to submit environmental concern to the same emphasis on variety that it applied to other themes, both in expression and location within the hymnal. The

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[73] "FAQ," http://voicestogetherhymnal.org/faq/, accessed January 29, 2021.

[74] "FAQ," http://voicestogetherhymnal.org/faq/, accessed January 29, 2021.

[75] "Guide to Adopting *Voices Together*," http://www.voicestogetherhymnal.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Guide-to-Adopting-Voices-Together-download.pdf, accessed February 8, 2023.

[76] "Guide to Adopting *Voices Together*."

[77] "FAQ," *Voices Together*.

[78] *Voices Together*, iii. Emphasis mine.

website also includes a worship resource specifically geared towards helping worship leaders organize services around environmental lament and creation care.[79]

Environmental hymns, rather than being sequestered into their own section in the table of contents, are scattered throughout *Voices Together*, suggesting environment as a theme underwriting all Mennonite experience. Environmental hymns were gathered and sorted into three categories, which Tice labeled as "a call to celebration, [a call] to lament, and a call to action."[80] The index provides a guide to locating these creation hymns, with categories separated into beauty, care, and lament, as well as hymns that speak of God as creator, hymns that reference animals, and seasonal hymns. This categorization demonstrates that the hymnal takes twenty-first century urgency around climate change very seriously: it recognizes human and non-human nature as something simultaneously beautiful, degraded, and worthy of consideration in our ethics.

Despite the intentional effort by the committee to assess the environmental valuation within the hymns chosen for *Voices Together*, material-spiritual dualism still makes an appearance in the book. Many of the hymns that present this ideology are old favorites of the Mennonite church. "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross (La cruz excelsa al contemplar)" (323) labels all of creation as unsatisfactory in comparison to the love of God; "Just a Closer Walk with Thee" (743) denigrates the earth as a "world of toil and snares"; and "On Jordan's Stormy Banks I Stand" (661) romanticizes heaven through the metaphor of Jordan. However, it is clear that an attempt was made to counter the images of these hymns, with numerous hymns emphasizing the value of creation. This begins with the very first hymn, "Summoned by the God Who Made Us" (1), which calls for people to "trust the goodness of creation; trust the Spirit strong within. Dare to dream the vision promised sprung from seed of what has been." "Here in This Place" (10) makes a similarly strong claim in proclaiming that God can be found here and now in our immediate surroundings—not just in a church building or some distant heaven: "here in this place, the new light is shining; / now is the dawning and now is the day."

This work to minimize dualistic expressions is a step in the right direction, but there is more to be done. It is unlikely that material-spiritual dualism will vanish from our hymnals any time soon. The "heart songs" of previous generations that have maintained a presence in newer hymnals often perpetuate theologically outdated or problematic images.

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[79] "Our Environment—Lament and Creation Care," http://voicestogetherhymnal.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Hymn-Sing-Blueprint_-Lament-and-Creation-Care-1.pdf, accessed February 8, 2023.

[80] Adam Tice, conversation, September 23, 2020.

This is something to which hymnal committees submit much thought; many old hymns are provided with updated texts that work to modernize the hymn's sentiments. This is most immediately evident in the push for inclusive language in *Hymnal: A Worship Book* and its successors. This is a complicated process, as many people have strong emotions tied to these old hymns and are resistant to their being edited.

The expressions of Romanticism (Tice's "call to celebration," perhaps) in *Voices Together* are a mix of the classic Romantic anthems of Mennonite hymnody alongside more fresh interpretations of a Romantic natural world. Favorites such as "For the Beauty of the Earth" (120), "All Things Bright and Beautiful" (177), "I Sing the Mighty Power of God" (182), and "How Great Thou Art" (436) make an appearance, as do more recent "classics" such as "In the Bulb There Is a Flower" (670). "This Is my Father's World" has been rephrased as "This Is God's Wondrous World" (180), though its Romanticism remains the same. Some elements of Romanticism that had less representation in recent hymnals also see use; "Fill Us with Your Feast" (309) returns to the idea of wilderness as a sublime place to find God.

Several expressions spiritualizing nature have been drawn from non-Euro-centric cultures. "Hacia Belen (Mary Journeyed)" (VT 224, also STS 20) depicts elements of nature rejoicing in the presence of Mary and Joseph, and "Qing zao qi lai kan (Golden Breaks the Dawn)" (VT 498) paints the rising of the sun in a rather Romantic manner, describing birds and flowers as manifestations of God's mercy. "Creation Is a Song / Ho'è enemeohe" (VT 181, STJ 24) is based upon the writings of Lawrence Hart, Mennonite minister and Peace Chief of the Cheyenne.[81] These inclusions, both new and continued, are important in broadening the scope of understanding of the natural world in Mennonite hymnody, and are equally important—if not more so—for their inclusion of non-Eurocentric perspectives in the Mennonite musical canon. The majority of Mennonites no longer are of European heritage; most currently live in the global South.[82] Further exploration of these diverse perspectives is a necessity in the development not just of Mennonite eco-theology but of Mennonite theology as a whole.

Romantic expressions of a panentheistic bent also see wide representation in *Voices Together*. God or attributes of God are depicted using natural imagery.[83] Some of these are notably stronger statements of

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[81] Paul Schrag and Tim Huber, "Lawrence Hart's Vision of Peace," *Anabaptist World*, August 23, 2020. https://anabaptistworld.org/lawrence-harts-vision-peace/.

[82] "Who Are the Mennonites," Mennonite Church USA, May 11, 2022. https://www.mennoniteusa.org/who-are-mennonites/.

[83] VT 98, 372, 373, 375, 424, 521, 539, 663, 828.

panentheism than found in previous hymnals; "I Am That Great and Fiery Force" (663) speaks authoritatively, using the voice of God to note that God is present in "ev'rything that lives," everything from "unseen wind" to "verdant trees." "There's a Wild Hope in the Wind" (828) suggests a mystical and feminine "Wild Hope" to be found in the wind, in the skies, and in the earth. Some hymns also lean toward panentheism in their proclamations of, or for, unity.[84]

Agrarian hymns make a notable comeback in *Voices Together*. All but nonexistent in the HWB supplements, a significant number of harvest hymns are in VT.[85] This uptick is likely representative of the emergent interest in food justice and exploration of food systems within American culture. Other subtypes of agrarian hymns also make an appearance; the agrarian metaphor for proselytizing emerges through "Be a Sower" (789). This hymn avoids some of the problematic elements classically associated with the metaphor, and functions rather nicely as an innocent call to environmental stewardship when read in a literal sense: "be a sower, plant a seed, let it grow into a tree. Give it water, watch it grow, and give it the love that it needs. Be humble, and gentle, and always keep looking for peace. . . ." Like some previous hymnals, VT also contains a hymn addressed more generally to good work in the name of God; "En medio de la vida (You Are the God within Life)" (526) depicts God as equally present in all types of livelihood.

Environmental justice is well represented in *Voices Together.* The hymnal combines the emergent theme of justice apparent in previous hymnals with an intentional environmental slant, finally allowing hymns to focus specifically upon environmental ethics. Many hymns in VT use Romantic celebratory lyrics to set up the natural ideal to which a suggested ethic can work towards. "The Garden Needs Our Tending Now" (788) does this by setting up its verses with images of various elements of nature (human and non-human) that have been degraded. It concludes each verse with an ethical suggestion, followed by the refrain "Earth shall be green and new, / Eden restored. *Terra viridissima*," envisioning a perfect natural space, notably not labeled as heaven. The hymn addresses each of Tice's categories of celebration, lamentation, and call to action. The refrain of "Called by Earth and Sky" (806) speaks of earth as "our sacred living trust," and its verses enumerate gifts of the natural world that deserve our care; notably, the hymn also does not explicitly mention God, therefore opening itself up for use in interfaith or nonreligious settings focused on environmental activism. Numerous other hymns similarly approach all three types: "Touch the Earth Lightly"

[84] VT 387, 390, 425, 568, 779.

[85] VT 122, 123, 124, 618, 747, 750.

(145) makes powerful stewardship statements, and "We Dream of a Turning" (209), one of Tice's own textual compositions, emphasizes the need for an ethic to minimize environmental destruction. "If the War Goes On" (794), first included in *Sing the Journey*, makes an appearance, calling out war as a significant contributor to environmental degradation.

Numerous hymns in *Voices Together* are oriented around anti-consumerist themes.[86] These hymns reflect the long-standing tradition of Mennonite non-conformity and are often strongly environmental in nature. "God, Give Me Time" (144) is a good example, using environmental harm as leverage against political systems. Its second verse notes that the "easy words of politics" can "threaten and destroy" and "kill creation's joy." Consumerism is also depicted as antithetical to environmental care, with numerous hymns spurning greed for its negative impacts on human and non-human nature. VT also contains hymns that provide fresh conceptions of how the church can relate to the natural world. Several connect the act of creation to sound, portraying the birth of sound as part of creation,[87] while others depict creation as starting with a sound.[88] Multiple hymns portray the response of the non-human world to the death of Jesus, or use natural metaphors to describe Jesus' death and resurrection.[89] "Now the Heavens Start to Whisper" (237) likens Christ to a plant. "Crashing Waters at Creation" (441) depicts various points throughout biblical history from the point of view of water, akin to the water-centric bioregionalism of watershed discipleship. These hymns offer potential new paths for Mennonite hymnody to engage ecology.

*Voices Together* marks a definite broadening of environmental imagery in Mennonite hymnody. Its intentional effort to suggest healthy land ethics without constraining theology appears successful in the abstract. Of course, in practice, individual congregations will pick and choose the hymns they deem appropriate for their respective theologies—different churches will prefer different images for their members to sing and internalize. While by no means perfect in its representation of creation, VT does provide a modest but healthy set of options from which churches can draw to craft their eco-theology. Whether they make those choices intentionally or not, the pool that is available skews more strongly towards ecological awareness and a sense of responsibility for creation than did previous hymnals.

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[86] MH 434; HWB 320; VT 144, 201, 308, 758.

[87] VT 121, 181.

[88] VT 270.

[89] VT 326, 329, 331, 353. This is not an entirely new theme. "How Shallow Former Shadows" (326) also makes an appearance in *Hymnal: A Worship Book*. However, the theme is more starkly represented in *Voices Together*.

Through an environmental lens, *Voices Together* manages the discord between tradition and contemporary theology fairly well. New concepts are presented for the consideration of the layperson—concepts distinct from the familiar framings of traditional elements of Mennonite culture but still clearly of Mennonite lineage. Although VT could have pushed for stronger representation of environmental content, it notably modernized framings of the environment in Mennonite hymnody.

## THE FUTURE OF MENNONITE ECO-HYMNODY

In conversation, Ken Nafziger suggested that a good hymnal is like a museum: it preserves tradition but also finds ways to make it newly relevant to people in the present. Through curation of historical beliefs alongside fresh theology, a hymnal can contextualize where the church is coming from ideologically, how it has changed, and where it may go. Hymnals are a potential resource for the different perspectives from which Mennonites can approach environmental ethics. This diversity is healthy, as there is no perfect land ethic; the ways forward will indeed require interaction between multiple land ethics. Our hymnals have historically centered on dualism, Romanticism, and agrarianism, and the recent ones show hints of the formation of a new, justice-oriented ecological awareness.

How can these existing themes be modernized, expanded, or discarded, and what new growth might occur in Mennonite hymnody? How can this hymnody continue to deepen its understanding and engagement of creation? Let me outline a handful of potential directions toward which Mennonite eco-theology can look—namely the reinterpretation of traditional Mennonite beliefs, the brand of bio-regionalism and Christian anarchism espoused in Ched Myers's *Watershed Discipleship*, and dark ecology, a sort of inversion of the Romantic ideal.

Some Anabaptist academics have emphasized the importance of various aspects of traditional Mennonite beliefs for modern environmental ethics. Heather Ann Ackley Bean's essay "Toward an Anabaptist/Mennonite Environmental Ethic" stresses the importance of a renewed commitment to non-conformity, particularly in being willing to go against the grain of consumerism. She also evokes Walter Klaassen's suggestion of adapting the value of non-violence to fit the whole of creation—a sort of restorative justice for the sake of the entire natural world. Drawing from Anabaptist historian John Ruth, she appeals to the founding beliefs of the Anabaptist movement: "concern for community, radical discipleship, literal adherence to the Sermon on the Mount, non-

resistance, and nonconformity."[90] She notes that these are "ecologically sound concepts" worth exploring in the attempt to clarify an Anabaptist environmental ethic,[91] and emphasizes the necessity of focusing our environmental ethics upon the Anabaptist love ethic, placing a high value on the sacredness of *all* life, a basic compassion for creation. Any motion for justice without compassion is self-contradictory and unsustainable.

Early Mennonite eco-theology largely centered on stewardship, exemplified by the tone of much of Redekop's *Creation and the Environment*. The introduction to the book claims that "[Mennonites] are environmentalists because . . . we have inherited the Judeo-Christian worldview that human beings are given the responsibility to 'tend the garden,' to nurture creation."[92] An environmental ethic of stewardship requires a reinterpretation of the call for humans to "subdue and have dominion"(Genesis 1:26–28) as, instead, "a command to care instead of to dominate."[93] Despite this reinterpretation, stewardship theology is often accused of endorsing anthropocentric domination of creation, and has lost favor in recent Anabaptist eco-theology.

The brand of bioregionalism and Christian anarchy espoused in Myers's *Watershed Discipleship* is also worth exploring in the pursuit of solidifying Anabaptist environmental ethics. Watershed discipleship entails a reinterpretation of Romanticism based in a bioregionalist emphasis on developing a relationship with our natural surroundings and becoming aware of our impact upon them. Myers suggests founding our environmental ethics upon our watersheds for several interlinking reasons. Water is a unifying factor across species: no living creature can go without water, and every living creature is a member of a watershed. He also believes that a sense of "placelessness" is one of the greatest problems confronting modern environmentalism. Myers argues that we need to develop a love and understanding of the land that we occupy, stating "we destroy places because we don't love them . . . we can't save places that we don't love, but it's also true that we can't love places we don't know."[94] We can speak more strongly for our individual surroundings—the places we know personally—than for a more abstract global environment.

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[90] Redekop, *Creation and the Environment*, 184.

[91] Redekop, *Creation and the Environment*, 194.

[92] Redekop, *Creation and the Environment*, xvii.

[93] Dula, "Anabaptist Environmental Ethics," 11.

[94] "Toward Watershed Discipleship: Re-inhabitory Theology and Practices Part 1," YouTube video, 45:19, posted by "Bartimaeus Cooperative Ministries," July 8, 2015. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EGJOi4No_Dk.

Christian anarchism, from which watershed discipleship takes its roots, offers a return to the roots of the Anabaptist tradition; the early Anabaptists worked to model the beliefs held by the early Christian church, often turned to as an example of functional, communally-based Christian anarchy. Members of the early church were staunchly egalitarian, held common ownership of property,[95] and elected officials democratically, expecting them to be held accountable to the people they represented.[96] All of this was done outside the structure of the state apparatus. The Anabaptist distinctives of "concern for community, radical discipleship, literal adherence to the Sermon on the Mount, non-resistance, and non-conformity" match these ideals well.[97]

Another fresh branch of ecological thought is "dark ecology," an emerging idea based on a sort of inversion of Romanticism.[98] The goal of many Romantics was to achieve, if only for a moment, a sense of oneness with nature. This mystic sense of achieving union with nature implies that one's basic state is generally separate from nature. This gives nature an aesthetic framing; we can choose whether or not to engage, whether or not to be affected by it or have an effect upon it. Dark ecologists, such as Timothy Morton, believe that this approach is not just false but deeply problematic, and perhaps one of the biggest stumbling blocks on the path to developing healthy environmental ethics. They argue that we must abandon the Romantic conception of nature, and in doing so radically reinterpret our place within nature—"not on Mont Blanc, but on the landfill."[99]

Of all the approaches noted here, dark ecology may be the hardest pill for the Mennonite church to swallow. It is perhaps the most abstract ethical construction I have represented. What does it mean to learn to love our trash? What ethics does dark ecology actually imply? Morton's book *Being Ecological* begins to address this. In a lecture for the "Royal Society for Arts, Manufactures and Commerce" in 2018, Morton summarized the book's thesis:

> There's this sort of message that we've got to be ecological, and it's this big stumbling block, and it sounds so complicated and difficult. . . . And that's very inhibiting . . . what's really cool is noticing something that's already the case. What's already the case is that

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[95] Acts 2:44-45, 4:32, NIV.

[96] Mark Van Steenwyk and Ched Myers, *That Holy Anarchist: Reflections on Christianity & Anarchism* (Minneapolis, MN: Missio Dei, 2012), 23.

[97] Redekop, *Creation and the Environment,* 184.

[98] Dark ecology can also be thought of as a pessimist's panentheism. It could easily be aligned with Willis Jenkins's formation of "eco-spirituality." See Willis Jenkins, *Ecologies of Grace: Environmental Ethics and Christian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

[99] "Why Nature Doesn't Exist: The Romantics, Slavoj Žižek and Dark Ecology," YouTube video, 3:56, posted by "Guppy School," February 23, 2017. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QwUlpBGN6hE&t=107s&ab_channel=GuppySchool.

> you're an embodied biological being that lives in a biosphere with this incredible bacterial microbiome, and so on, that's symbiotically related to all these other lifeforms in this incredibly fragile but very, very beautiful and dynamic way that could easily get destroyed or reconfigured in some way.[100]

No matter what we do, we are *being ecological*. The question is how healthily we act, and for whom.

Despite its abstract nature, dark ecology holds promise in its radical egalitarian perspective on the valuation of nature. The flat valuation of all creation suggested by Morton and others undercuts the instrumental valuation of creation implicitly suggested by material-spiritual dualism, Romanticism, and agrarianism. It also can work against some of the difficulties of other eco-theologies if used in tandem with them. For example, a stewardship theology constructed upon a fundamental belief in the human as holding equal value to all other aspects of creation undermines the risk of anthropocentric domination.

Dark ecology offers insightful critiques of much of the existing environmental conversation. Morton notes the fire-and-brimstone, "Jeremiad" quality held by much modern environmentalism, suggesting that this type of ecological speech misses the mark and serves solely to foster fear (and often paralyzing apathy), rather than to spur people to environmental action. In the place of such speech, he supplies the idea of a "gentle" ecology. He does not specify what a gentle ecology would entail, other than to say it is not incapable of being disturbing and it does not mean inaction. Perhaps an exploration of this conversation could become a way for Mennonites to engage dark ecology. Our pacifist history and emergent orientation towards justice can help us embrace and proclaim a gentle ecology that recognizes that we ourselves are a part of nature.

None of these ethical frameworks are without flaws. Stewardship theology risks anthropocentric domination of creation. Bioregionalism risks becoming NIMBYism, in which fights against ecologically problematic issues in one's bioregion or watershed could result in their being relocated to an area less capable of speaking out against such things. Some veins of dark ecology risk demoralizing the potential environmentalist into a state of paralyzed inactivity, if not apathy. These imperfections, though, do not mean we should write off these views. Perhaps, as Peter Dula has suggested, solutions to these drawbacks are found in the interaction of multiple ways of thinking.[101] Many will likely

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[100] "Being Ecological | Timothy Morton | Rsa Replay," YouTube video, 54:15, posted by "RSA," January 29, 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d_5UWI-SEVE. See also Timothy Morton, *Being Ecological* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2019).

[101] Dula, "Anabaptist Environmental Ethics," 31.

feel naturally compelled to elements in each of these ways, and engaging these intersections will help construct a new Anabaptist eco-theology.

My goal is not to prescribe an eco-theology for the Mennonite church, nor to provide a conclusive form for applications of environmental themes in hymn-writing. My hope is rather to distill some of the modern approaches to eco-theology and raise the question of how they could be expressed in hymnody. And I want to emphasize that currently it is just that: a question. Further investigation of what this means is necessary. In order to develop a robust, specifically-Mennonite eco-hymnody, this conversation must be disseminated throughout the Mennonite community. We cannot move forward without awareness of these themes and input from a broad base of Mennonites. As in congregational singing, in which the power of the song emerges from the combination of different voices, the vigor of eco-theology comes from the combination of different trains of ecological thought.

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We internalize the theology of hymns through the performance of congregational singing. What we sing matters, because it informs what we think and how we act. Our relationship to the land has shifted over time, and the ways that relationship is expressed in our hymnody have mirrored and underpinned these changes. Though *Voices Together* makes a significant step in its intentional investigation of environmental expressions in hymnody, we should investigate its eco-theology further and navigate its expressions with care. In doing so, we should recall the notes in the prefaces to many Mennonite hymnals emphasizing the importance of representing traditional songs alongside new ones: we must value our past and present eco-theology as well as search for new, fruitful threads.

With the 2020 publication of *Voices Together*, it is unlikely the Mennonite church will see a new hymnal published in the coming years. We must use this time to select and reinterpret the hymnic eco-theologies we want to carry forward. Of course, we are not limited to singing only the hymns included in denominational hymnals; experimentation and exploration of new ideas pushing beyond the bounds of denominational hymnals is a healthy and necessary step in the process of expanding and deepening our eco-hymnody. As we continue our tradition of singing together, we must consider the implications of what we are singing, and how we want to shape our hymnody's presentation of the natural world and our place in it. Whether pulling from old heart songs or new eco-theological threads, the theologies we embrace now will shape our worldview—and world—for years to come.