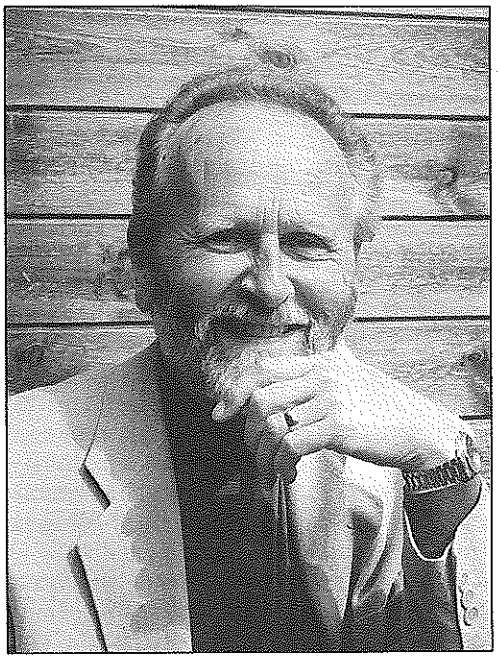
# My Hymn-Writing Journey

Fred Kaan



It is a privilege to be in your company again after 15 years. Time flies (as they say); a lot of water has gone under the bridge (to use another platitude). For me, now in retirement, the awareness of movement is still relatively strong, and even when I look at some of the more unattractive and less dynamic features of the church, I am with Galileo all the way, all the way back to 1632, when he is reputed to have said (or maybe, he muttered it under his breath—after all, he was addressing a Pope!): "*e pur si muove*," and yet it moves.

You have invited me to speak about my hymn-writing journey. A title like this bears within itself the risk of my having to be personal and autobiographical, and inevitably anecdotal here and there, but I hope you will be able to live with that.

My casual introductory references to time flying, water flowing, and the earth moving (in whatever way you may wish to take that!) are all appropriate to the idea of undertaking a journey through the landscape of life. It has a beginning and a destination. It progresses from A to B. It is a growing experience.

Where does a hymn-writer's journey begin? Where did this hymn-writer's journey begin? Did it all start when I wrote my first hymn in 1963?

There's a well-known story about a tourist in Ireland who had lost his way and who asked a local rustic: "Can you tell me how to get to Killarney?" The classic reply was: "If I wanted to get to Killarney, I wouldn't start from here!"

Although I wrote my first ever hymn text when I was 34, I cannot ignore or discount those earlier years of my life when I wrote no hymns at all, no poetry worth talking about.

I cannot be coy about my age, because under every text of mine that goes into a hymnbook somewhere, be it in Japan or Indonesia, in Hungary or Iceland, I am always identified as: Fred Kaan, bracket, 1929, dash, watch this space, bracket.

But, you know, it is quite amazing how people sometimes manage to manipulate even that kind of objective biographical detail. A few years ago I was asked to preach at an ecumenical service in Kettering, in central England, during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. The local organizing committee had included one of my hymns in the order of service.

When it was all over and I stood in the porch to shake hands with people on their way out, a woman "of a certain age" grabbed me by the hand, drew me impulsively to herself, and said: "Did you really write that in 1929?"

Some people put years on me; some people have been putting years on me throughout my life. I hesitate to slap a label on them, but they are

---

*Fred Kaan is a retired minister of the United Reformed Church in the United Kingdom. He is a graduate of Utrecht University and Bristol University (B.A.) and Geneva Theological College (Ph.D.), and received an honorary Th. D. from Debrecen Theological Academy in Hungary. A well-known hymn writer, his texts appear in numerous recent hymnals. He has published five collections of hymns; his texts have been translated into over fifteen languages. This article is based on his presentation to the 1995 Hymn Society Conference in San Diego.*

the kind of people who manifest all the characteristics of a breeze-block wall, so to speak. Their attitude and words, and their stagnant tradition all give out only one signal: "Nothing changeth here!" Their minds are unalterably made up, biblically, religiously, theologically, and emotionally, politically, and ideologically. And so I would mentally reach for John Robinson's parting words to the Pilgrim Fathers in 1620: "The Lord hath yet more light and truth to break forth from His Holy Word."

Or, I would appeal to Proverbs 16:32: "The person who conquers himself/herself is stronger than the person who conquers a city." I believe it is legitimate to paraphrase this and to say: "The person who is capable of changing his or her mind, is stronger than someone who conquers a city."

If, as Pastor Robinson said, the Lord does have more light and truth to break forth from his holy Word, then I believe that Christians should be more seriously open to the prompting of the Holy Spirit than they often are, and stop deciding how they will vote at assemblies, committees, and church meetings before any discussion under the guidance of that Spirit has even started!

One of the scandals in Christian thought is that over the centuries we have come to regard tradition as a static commodity: it comes to us from the past and stops on our desk, our work-top, our draining-board, or in the pulpit; whereas, in reality, the renewing reality of God's will for the world and the human family, tradition is given to us as a dynamic challenge: that-which-is-in-the-process-of-being-handed-on.

Latin scholars among you will no doubt confirm that if you want to say "that which has been handed on," you would have to use the word "*traditum*."

As it is, we are given "*traditio*," tradition, something that is alive and therefore capable of change and evolution and—yes!—revolution!

Letty Russell Hoekendijk once said (and I am paraphrasing her) that we should distinguish between Tradition with a capital T—that is, Jesus Christ, handed on from generation to generation—and tradition with a small t, which we ought to replace with the word "traditioning."

## Traditioning and the Postman

The traditioning in my life was—I suppose—straightforward and complex from birth.

My mother came from a long line of rather conservative Netherlands Reformed people. My father was a more secular person, typical of the largely unchurched population in the province of North Holland; he was a radical socialist. Neither of them had had more than incomplete secondary education but they were avid readers, and they were politically alert, though not manifestly so. The Second World War was to change all that.

From the moment I was baptized in the splendidly Gothic Saint Bavo Cathedral in Haarlem, until I was in my late teens, I never set foot in a church.

There was, I recall, a very truncated liturgical pattern to my life in that, as a child and a young boy, I did use to say simple prayers to a Remote Entity somewhere in the universe, and these prayers, unvocalized before I went to sleep each night, had a three-fold thrust: I used to pray that the house would not burn down; that my parents would not die before I was able to handle it; and that there would be no war. The first two petitions were "granted"; the third one wasn't, and I spent five years under Nazi occupation, watching my hitherto fairly unobtrusive parents being transformed into cunning members of the resistance movement—my father as a neighborhood commander, my mother as a gun-runner. Who could have believed it? On top of that, sheltering a Jewish woman for two and a half years, and subsequently an escaped political prisoner from Belsen, added, to say the least, to the risk of daily living.

When it was all over, for some unaccountable reason, I was a committed pacifist, and I started going to church—maybe because some of my fellow students used to go to a weekly service organized in one of our local churches for young people between 15 and 25. Becoming a church member, and simultaneously offering myself for ordination training, simply seemed to be part of a logical progression. By then I had dropped all thought of going to art college and becoming a painter.

When I finally reached the point of ordination and entering the ministry, it was in a country other than the country of my birth, having to speak a language my mother and father never taught me. But also, I was pretty unencumbered by a vast quantity of traditional luggage consisting of theological jargon, churchy habits, and also (I should like to think!) of parsonic mannerisms—in Dutch or English!

It was in my first pastorate, quite early on, when I was still finding my feet and trying to improve my English, that an earnest young postman came to see me one day and said: "I am going to leave the church." So I asked him: "Why?" "Because the hymns don't send me any longer."

Now, even as a fairly recently arrived immigrant, I already knew enough English in those days to realize that "being sent" can mean two things, and that the secondary meaning is "being moved or thrilled or excited, being filled with enthusiasm."

A Schumann string quartet can send me, as can Oscar Peterson, Herb Ellis, and Ray Brown. Chagall's windows in the Metropolitan Opera in New York send me; so do tropical sunsets in Tahiti. But what if the hymns we sang in church so paralyzed my postman-friend, that he could not even be sent from A to B, or from Alpha to Omega, or to the ends of the earth? Then you are really in trouble; the mission of the church is then seri-

ously impaired and mission—after all—is what the church exists for.

Ever since then, I have been looking at hymns with a more critical ear.

But it wasn't until I was called to be the minister of the Pilgrim Church in Plymouth that I suddenly, again for no accountable reason other than that the church had given me total freedom and had encouraged me to explore with them new ways of worship and service, began to write.

As I found myself more and more frustrated or bored or even angry at not finding in the hymnbook what I felt we needed, or whenever I got excited—yes, whenever a new discovery in reading the Bible between the lines really sent me—I would reluctantly sit down and stammeringly write my own text, generally late on Saturday night or early on Sunday morning.

I have never consciously aspired or deliberately aimed at becoming a hymn writer; you see here before you the most surprised hymn writer in the world. Within the confines of a local church, set in an urban industrialized context, I simply tried to respond to and to reflect the commitment of that remarkable congregation, namely, to try and proclaim and live the Gospel in the modern city, in words and decisions that could be understood.

There were stretches of time when I wrote one hymn a week, but then, after a while, I sat down to sift all that accumulated material, discarding a large number of texts that were clearly no more than one-off items, and I put together *Pilgrim Praise*, a words-only collection of fifty hymns. It was a small booklet which we never advertised or promoted; yet it soon became known all over the United Kingdom, and very quickly also around the world. Its success, I often think, lay in its size. Most Sundays we used to have visitors from all over the world worshiping with us. Many of them played fast and loose with the eighth commandment: *Pilgrim Praise* was small enough to go unnoticed into a man's coat pocket or a woman's handbag....

In no time at all, requests started to come in from local churches all over the United Kingdom, asking whether they could purchase the little book as a supplement to their existing hymnbooks. It was not very long after that, either, that hymnbook committees in different parts of the world started to ask for permission to include these texts in their new hymnals. The most startling request was for 25 hymns (half the contents of *Pilgrim Praise*!). It came from the joint hymnbook committee of the Anglican and United Churches in Canada. A Canadian friend sent me a paper cutting when the red hymnbook came out in 1971—the headline said "Kaan beats Watts and Wesley." More recently, I have slipped in the charts: in *Rejoice and Sing*, the new hymnal of the United Reformed Church in the United Kingdom, I am third after Watts and Wesley. *Sic transit gloria mundi.*

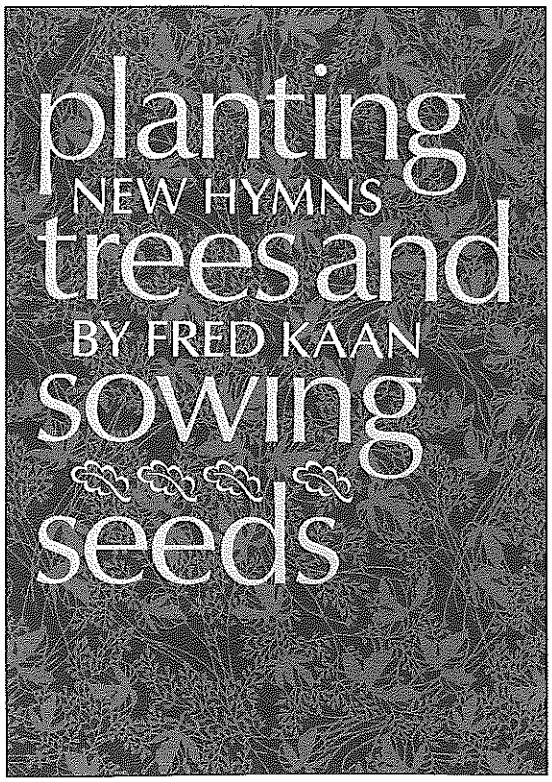
## The Hymn Explosion

For the first ten years or so, it all happened without a publisher, without any promotion, without a sales technique. Quite unwittingly I became part of what Erik Routley has called the "hymn explosion in the sixties," in which I found myself in the stimulating company of Fred Pratt Green and Brian Wren.

It is with some diffidence, but also with a mixture of amazement and pleasure that I should like to share with you what Caryl Micklem, chairman of the Hymn Society of Great Britain and Ireland, recently said about my surprise appearance on the hymn-writing scene:

> To Fred Kaan belongs to the greatest part of the credit for having started the "hymn explosion" of the late sixties and since.
>
> *Pilgrim Praise* was, and will for ever remain, epoch-making; both because it demonstrated so convincingly that hymns could be written in modern English, and because it so passionately "earthed" hymnody in the real concerns of our day.
>
> Everyone of us who has since set his or her hand to hymn-writing is indebted to him for showing us what might be done.

The very first hymn I ever wrote was a post-communion text. How could it have been otherwise? What happens after we have shared the bread and wine at the Lord's table has from the beginning been one of my main preoccupations: how do we make that vital transition from worship to service; how do we prepare ourselves for the liturgy after the liturgy? In the first line of the



last stanza I have changed "Then grant us courage, Father-God" to: "Then give us grace, Companion-God." I would remind you that the word com-panion comes from the Latin *cum*—together with—and *panis*—bread. A companion is someone with whom you break bread.

Now let us from this table rise,
renewed in body, mind and soul;
with Christ we die and live again,
his selfless love has made us whole.

With minds alert, upheld by grace,
to spread the Word in speech and deed,
we follow in the steps of Christ,
at one with all in hope and need.

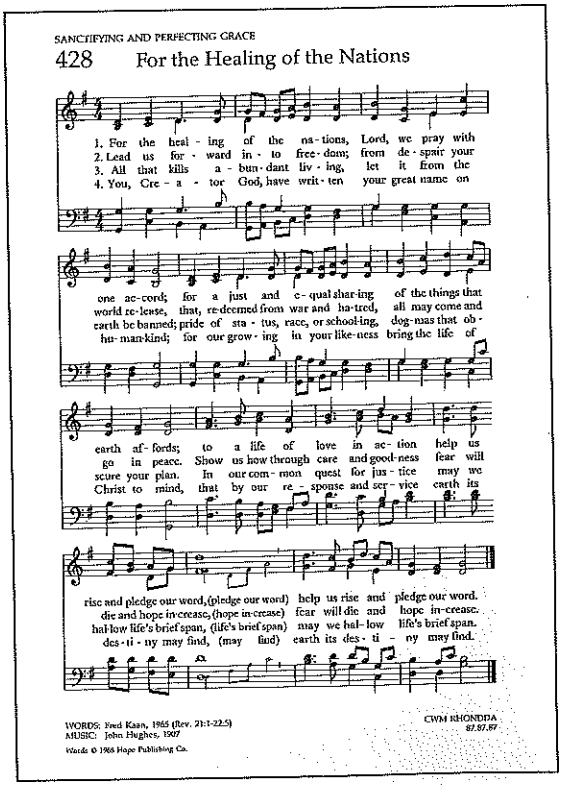
To fill each human house with love,
it is the sacrament of care;
the work that Christ began to do
we humbly pledge ourselves to share.

Then give us grace, Companion-God,
to choose again the pilgrim way,
and help us to accept with joy
the challenge of tomorrow's day.



Caryl Micklem made reference to the fact that *Pilgrim Praise* "earthed hymnody in the real concerns of our day" (in American-English you would probably say "grounded"). That is indeed one of the major driving forces behind the way I read the Bible, or do theology, or write hymns, or try to live in this world, and reach out to "that which is of God in other people," to use the Quaker phrase.

The longer I live, the more passionately I


SANCTIFYING AND PERFECTING GRACE

428 For the Healing of the Nations

1. For the heal - ing of the na - tions, Lord, we pray with
2. Lead us for - ward in - to free - dom; from de - spair your
3. All that kills a - bun - dant liv - ing, let it from the
4. You, Cre - a - tor God, have writ - ten your great name on

one ac-cord; for a just and e - qual shar-ing of the things that
world re-lease, that, re-deemed from war and ha-tred, all may come and
earth be banned; pride of sta - tus, race, or school-ing, dog-mas that ob -
hu-man-kind; for our grow - ing in your like-ness bring the life of

earth af-fords; to a life of love in ac - tion help us
go in peace. Show us how through care and good-ness fear will
scure your plan. In our com - mon quest for jus - tice may we
Christ to mind, that by our re - sponse and ser - vice earth its

rise and pledge our word, (pledge our word) help us rise and pledge our word.
die and hope in-crease, (hope in-crease) fear will die and hope in-crease.
hal-low life's brief span, (life's brief span) may we hal - low life's brief span.
des - ti - ny may find, (may find) earth its des - ti - ny may find.

WORDS: Fred Kaan, 1965 (Rev. 21:1-22:5)
MUSIC: John Hughes, 1907


CWM RHONDDA
87.87.87

believe that our hymnody, alongside all other things that constitute living and working in our world today, has to be earth-bound, people-focussed and Christ-centered.

When I did a workshop at the Fourth Canadian Christian Festival in Hamilton, Ontario, I had one very disturbing experience when I attended the opening service—there was a young pop/gospel singer who sang a song that really made me squirm and rebel. The upshot of it was: there can be no happiness on earth; heaven is our home. It borders on blasphemy. I believe that this is a denial of the Gospel and of the doctrines of creation and incarnation, and that speculating about heaven is a non-creative "activity." In two of my more recent (not yet published) texts I have used one and the same line—not because I had run out of new lines or ideas, but because I believe so passionately that (to quote the line in question) "this is the only earth we know."

If God deliberately and lovingly created the earth and all that it contains, and if Christ became a truly human being, then this earth and human beings matter infinitely—collectively as society and community, and individually, as people one-by-one. And whenever politicians admonish us and tell us not to meddle in politics, but to concentrate on saving souls and to stick to the church's doctrines and sacraments, we should raise our voices in loud protest.

In the old days, the international distress signal in Morse code was S.O.S.—Save Our Souls; it never meant soul as distinct from body or mind. S.O.S. from people on a life-raft in mid-Atlantic never meant: drop us some bibles, tracts, and hymnbooks, but rather: for God's sake, save our lives!

My wife is a keen climber and fell-walker; I tend to prefer looking after the fire and making sure that the red wine stays at room temperature. Often, when she returns home after a day of conquering mountain tops in the English Lake District, she'll say to me: "I never saw a soul all day." What do you think she means? Christ did not become a flesh and blood human being for nothing.

And so, throughout my hymn-writer's life I have poured my concern and commitment into the crafting of a number of texts that focus on the earth and the city, on human society, on Christ among us in the here-and-now, sharing our humanity, on justice and life in all its fullness for all women, men, and children, on the pursuit of human rights for everyone.

A few critics, who have chosen to be selective and who have zeroed in exclusively on this type of hymn and who have pretended that there were no other types and moods and modes of writing among my whole output, have often been quick to reach for the word "left-wing." At one point, in 1972, the Conservative Member of Parliament, Enoch Powell, even expressed his misgivings about my ways of writing in a House of Commons de-

bate. I felt rather flattered that the other writer he criticized was Sydney Carter; I was in Very Good Company!

"Strident left-wing propaganda" is a more recent expression of irritation at some of my texts. Alan Gaunt, one of England's most outstanding hymn-writers, graciously sprang to my defense in a letter to the editor of the Hymn Society of Great Britain and Ireland *Bulletin*:

> Fred's texts are often concerned with the working out of the Gospel's demands in the whole of life, but surely, concern for social justice, the feeding of the hungry, and the sharing of the earth's resources, have never been a left-wing prerogative, have they?

Quite so!

One of the hymns that is—I suppose—representative of that category of my hymnic concern is the text "People matter, people count." It expresses my preoccupation with the church's role in the real world of urban life. It was triggered off by Felix Adler's text:

> Sing we of the golden city
> pictured in the legends old;
> everlasting light shines o'er it,
> wondrous tales of it are told...

More and more people live in real cities, or they work in nearby cities, or they are unemployed or homeless in our city streets.

When Christ wept over the city (Luke 19), he was not weeping over some imaginary "heavenly Salem," but over the harsh reality of an earthly Jerusalem—*Yerushalayim* in Hebrew, which is plural! a divided city, uptown and downtown as in Manhattan, West End and East End as in London; *Yerushalayim*, where even the Temple had become segregated, where foreigners were only allowed so far, and women were kept in their place so that they could play no significant role. As I said earlier on: speculating about heaven is a non-creative activity. It is a cop-out.

So:

> Sing we of the modern city,
> scene alike of joy and stress;
> sing we of its nameless people
> in their urban wilderness.
> Into endless rows of houses
> life is set a million-fold,
> life expressed in human beings,
> daily born and growing old.
>
> In the city full of people,
> world of speed and hectic days;
> in the ever-changing setting
> of the latest trend and craze,
> Christ is present, and among us
> in the crowd we see him stand.
> In the bustle of the city
> Jesus Christ is Everyman.[1]
>
> God is not remote in heaven
> but on earth to share our shame,
> changing graph and mass and numbers
> into persons with a name.
> Christ has shown, beyond statistics,
> human life with glory crowned;
> by his timeless presence proving:
> people matter, people count!



## Mrs. Thatcher Was Wrong!

I suppose the best known and most widely reprinted and translated hymn of mine, world-wide, is the hymn on human rights, "For the healing of the nations." But a hymn that might conceivably have overtaken it in popularity, if I had written it 10 years earlier, is my text "Hands shaped like a cradle." It was one of the winning entries in a hymnwriting contest, organized by BBC television, in cooperation with Oxford University Press. Quite a large number of people have written or spoken to me to tell me that they think it is the best hymn I have ever written. I cannot be so sure myself—how difficult it is to be objective about one's own work!—but the indications are that this text, published six years ago, has really taken off. The hymn progresses from a "treasure held" in stanza one to a treasure being handed on in stanza five. It is yet another articulation of that passionate concern I have about the relationship between what happens in church and what happens in the world afterwards. The logical sequence to receiving the bread at the communion table has to be the sharing of bread with the hungry—whether that hunger is purely and desperately for physical bread, or for the Bread of Life that is Christ.

I believe that there is no dichotomy between the spiritual and the material, no separation of holy things from homely things. If God is unique and one, and human beings have been created in God's image, then we are meant to be unique and one—I sometimes think that being created in God's image is not so much a statement about where we came from, as about where we are going.

In the early days of the ecumenical movement, there was a theological "sound-bite" doing the round which said: "doctrine divides, service unites." It was a kind of shorthand, I suppose, and I think I know what it meant, but it still disturbs me deeply—much in the same way as I was angered by a group of hostile elders on Vancouver Island some years ago, who, just before I was due to go into the church to take part in a workshop on hymns and worship, cornered me in the vestry, wanting to know whether I believed in a "social Gospel" or an "evangelical Gospel."

In all the primitiveness of my theological awareness, I had to say to them that I thought there was

[1] Everyman is a reference to the 1529 English morality play of that name, drawn from the fifteenth-century Dutch original entitled "Elkerlikc."

only one Gospel, and that that Gospel had to do with human wholeness—wholeness as it relates to the individual woman, man, or child, but also as it relates to the human beings in community, to society, to the living-together of those who bear God's likeness, on whom God has a claim and who therefore have human rights and commitments.

One of the most appalling things Mrs. Thatcher ever said (and she said many appalling things during her "reign") was that there is no such thing as society.

The hymn "Hands shaped like a cradle" was triggered off when I watched worshipers go to the communion rail for the eucharist, shaping their hands like a cradle in order to receive the bread. Bethlehem (Hebrew for House of Bread) did not really live up to its name until Christ, the Bread of Life, was laid in the manger!

Put peace into each other's hands
and like a treasure hold it,
protect it like a candle-flame,
with tenderness enfold it.

Put peace into each other's hands
with loving expectation;
be gentle in your words and ways,
in touch with God's creation.

Put peace into each other's hands
like bread we break for sharing,
look people warmly in the eye:
our life is meant for caring.

As at communion, shape your hands
into a waiting cradle;
the gift of Christ receive, revere,
united round the table.

Put Christ into each other's hands,
he is love's deepest measure;
in love make peace, give peace a chance,
and share it like a treasure.



It has been said that all our creative activity is derived; we trace it all back to God. Because God is the creator, therefore we are enabled, commissioned to create. We are given stimuli and ideas, skills and talents to go on creating. And it is right and proper to give thanks to God for involving us in that ongoing creative process.

However, the fact of the matter is that often, perhaps more often than not, these stimuli, ideas, and impulses come to us through people, through earthly events, past, present, and future—with predominant emphasis being give to the present. They come to us through people corporately, through what is happening in society, and through human beings in one-to-one relationships. Writing hymns, crafting theologies, making peace, caring for people, or replenishing the earth never happen in a vacuum, in laboratory conditions, but in the daily reality of life on earth with all its pain and joy, all its Good Fridays (plural) and its Easter (singular).

The mystery of life and death has throughout my life prompted me to ask questions, to want to know more, and this fluctuating mood of saying "I believe," and at the same time crying out "help me in my unbelief" or "help me where faith falls short," is reflected in a number of hymns on the theme of faith and doubt.

## Hymns of Faith and Doubt

I should like to introduce two texts in which I have tried to wrestle with this tension between being confident in the faith, and going round in a circle of questioning and search.

In one, "A hymn of grateful recall and renewed commitment," which is intended for All Saints Day and memorial services and anniversaries, I have tried to deal with this whole issue by reflecting the remarkable personality of a good friend—a professor of mathematics and head of science education, and a questioning elder in the United Reformed Church—who died of cancer, aged 56.

For all who have enriched our lives,
whom we have loved and known,
for saints alive among us still
by whom our faith is honed,
we thank you, God, who came and comes
through women, children, men,
to share the highs and lows of life:
God-for-us, now as then.

For all who with disarming love
have led us to explore
the risk of reasoning and doubt,
new realms not known before,
we thank you, God, who came and comes
to free us from our past,
from ghettos of a rigid mind,
from truths unfit to last.

For all whose laughter has unnerved
tradition gone awry,
who with incisive gentleness
pursue each human "why?"
we thank you, God, who came and comes
to those who probe and ask,
who seek to know the mind of Christ
and take the church to task.

Now for each other and ourselves
we pray that, healed of fear,
we may re-live the love of Christ,
prepared in hope to err.
Then leave us, God, who comes and goes,
in human-ness to grow,
to care for people, tend the earth,
—the only earth we know!



The other illustration is one that struggles with the issue of human suffering. This text arose

out of my very strong emotional pastoral involvement with a young couple who lost their 15-month-old son in a drowning incident in Dubai.

It brought back to me memories of the death of my own first-born son, and yet, having been through that experience, I had no glib words, no trite phrases, no pious answers for that young couple; only my own rebelliousness to put alongside theirs, and for the rest to sit where they sat, in the silence of human solidarity.

When, O God, our faith is tested
and our hope is undermined,
when our love of living shrivels
and we feel bereft and drained,
when we turn to you and cry
for your answer to our "why?"

With emotions taut to breaking,
hearts with hurt and havoc frayed,
reason by remorse diminished,
souls distraught as if betrayed,
God of bleakness and abyss,
why have you forsaken us?

As we question and accuse you
out of depths of being tried,
could it be, God! that in weakness
you yourself are crucified?
Are you with us in our grief?
Help us in our unbelief!



Not quite on the same lines, but closely related, is a text I have called "A hymn for growing Christians." It came about as a result of what I would call "doodles in Bible study." It wasn't exactly an exercise of vital importance, but it was at least intriguing to discover that if God rested on the seventh day, having spent the preceding six days of the week speaking creatively, and that seventh day was the Jewish Sabbath, which is our Saturday, then men and woman were created on the day before the Sabbath, in other words, our Friday (whether you take the creation story symbolically or literally). It was also on a Friday that Jesus was crucified, and if for a whimsical moment you can free yourself from the concept of linear time, and think into an awareness that time and space can be telescoped into one, then the cross is planted (present tense) on the day we are born. There is then a strange interrelatedness between the death of Christ and the life of human beings, a relatedness which is there in any case!

The closing stanza of the hymn has caused some consternation among my friends who have failed to spot the footnote.

I believe with all my heart that we can in fact give no greater glory to God than by becoming/being truly adult and grown-up. There is this great line in Ezekiel 2: "O mortal, stand (up) on your feet and I will speak with you." The original Hebrew says of course, "Son of Man (*Ben-Adam*!), stand on your feet."

We may be accustomed to see ourselves as children of God—"We are but little children meek" (?)—but we are destined to become grown-up children. A man or a woman who never becomes independent of his or her parents will have difficulty coping adequately with life. A person who remains tied to mother's or father's apron strings all through life has a problem—counselling may then well be called for.

There is a more subtle biblical piece of evidence for the need to stand on our own two feet in splendid independence before God.

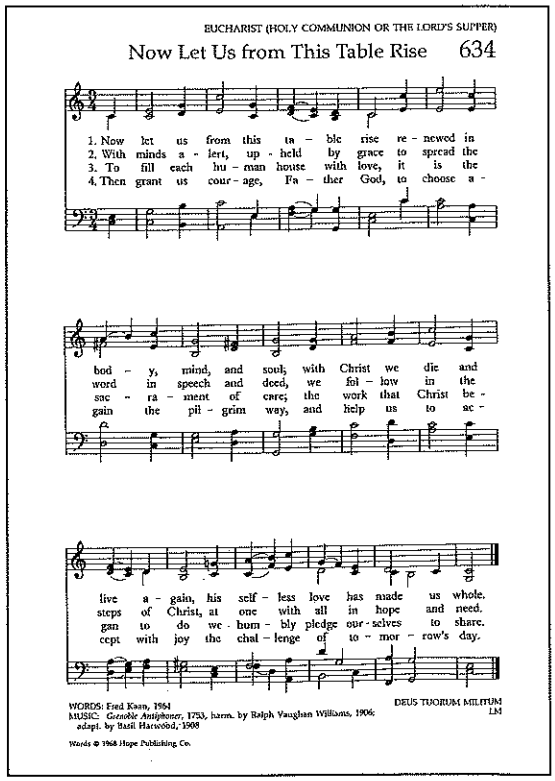
In the trial scene before Pontius Pilate, the people were given a choice: whom do you want me to release? Jesus Barabbas or Jesus the Son of Man, which in Aramaic would have been Jesus Bar-Adam? The choice was between two characters, each called Jesus, but the one was Bar-Abbas, son of daddy, daddy's boy; the other was son of humanity, true human beings. The crowd chose daddy's boy.

Some of you may find this a somewhat fanciful piece of biblical exegeses, but it played an essential part in the birth of the following hymn:

Our God, who on the Friday of creation
conferred on us the freedom of the earth,
help us to make the most of all the choices
you set before us at the dawn of birth.

Give to your people confidence in striving
for life that is in faith and act complete;
redeem us from the blasphemy of praying
with lazy hands and unintending feet.

We want to be! so draw our will to Jesus


EUCHARIST (HOLY COMMUNION OR THE LORD'S SUPPER)

Now Let Us from This Table Rise 634

1. Now let us from this ta - ble rise re - newed in
2. With minds a - lert, up - held by grace to spread the
3. To fill each hu - man house with love, it is the
4. Then grant us cour - age, Fa - ther God, to choose a -

bod - y, mind, and soul; with Christ we die and
word in speech and deed, we fol - low in the
sac - ra - ment of care; the work that Christ be -
gain the pil - grim way, and help us to ac -

live a - gain, his self - less love has made us whole.
steps of Christ, at one with all in hope and need.
gan to do we - hum - bly pledge our - selves to share.
cept with joy the chal - lenge of to - mor - row's day.

WORDS: Fred Kaan, 1964
MUSIC: *Gontoble Antiphoner*, 1753, harm. by Ralph Vaughan Williams, 1906; adapt. by Basil Harwood, 1908

DEUS TUORUM MILITUM
LM

whose cross is planted on the day we're
born;
then help us to accept a life of Fridays,
to call them good, and live on love alone.

God, give us grace to honor you by choosing
the risk of growing up and taking care;
teach us, while wholly on your strength
depending,
to live our life as if you were not there.[2]



Roger Williamson, Assistant Secretary for International Affairs of the Church of England, recently addressed the Churches Human Rights Forum in London on "Religion, Intolerance, Inhumanity, and Human Rights." His sub-title was: "God became human—can we?"

## The Hijacking of Oikoumene

As surprisingly and unsolicitedly as most other significant moves or events in my life, I then found myself transplanted into the sphere of an ecumenical international ministry, during which I visited 82 countries, using 120 different airlines, and meeting hundreds of amazing people by whom my life has been and continues to be enriched. Life was hectic and movement never stopped.

I shall not bore you with the details, but in conclusion I should like to share with you one text that came out of that time-span of international ministry. It is a translation.

The original is by the Israeli writer/philosopher Shalom ben-Chorin. I was asked to translate his text into English at the 1983 Vancouver Assembly of the World Council of Churches; I was given half an hour to do it.

The hymn has been criticized by some for not being manifestly Christian, but I would draw your attention to the Old Testament, to Jeremiah 1, by which the original text was inspired:

> The word of the Lord came to me, saying: "Jeremiah, what do you see?" And I said: "I see the branch of an almond tree."
> Then the Lord said to me: "You have seen well, for I am watching over my word to perform it."

What gets lost in the translation from the Hebrew is the use of a pun:

branch of an almond tree—*shaqed*
I am watching—*shoqed*

And so the biblical text is a powerful statement that almond blossom in springtime symbolizes the faithfulness of God.

Almond trees, renewed in bloom,
do they not proclaim
life returning year by year,
love that will remain?

Almond blossom, sign of life
in the face of pain,
raises hope in people's hearts:
spring has come again.

War destroys a thousand-fold,
hatred scars the earth,
but the day when almonds bloom
is a time of birth.

Friends, give thanks for almond blooms
swaying in the wind:
token that the gift of life
triumphs in the end.



So there you have it; one surprised hymn writer's journey through life—local, national, international, but always ecumenical.

The word ecumenical, from the Greek *oikoumene,* isn't originally a churchy word at all. Religious people have hijacked it from the secular world, and restricted it to apply only to the search for Christian unity. But when Caesar Augustus wanted to know how many people there were in his empire, he issued a decree that a census be held in the *oikoumene*—the whole inhabited world.

It would be a healthy thing indeed if we allowed this word yet again to incorporate that original notion of the whole secular world, with its unlabeled human beings, created in God's image.

Our words ecumenical, economy and economics, and ecology all come from the one Greek root: *oikos* (or *ecos*), meaning house.

It is the house that God built—not a chapel, church or cathedral, but the house of the world, our house of life, on the only earth we know. ■

[2] So to speak!