

Current Trends of Hymns for Children as seen in The Hymnal for Children of the UCC in Japan (2002)

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It is my great pleasure to be a part of the “Hymnology Seminar from Timisoara .” It is also joy to be able to discuss some issues in hymnody for children as reflected in The Hymnal for Children of the United Church of Christ in Japan which was published in 2002. As we think of hymnody for children, especially when we examine a children's hymnal, we need to go back to the classical premise stated by John Wesley. For his statement is a starting point of thinking consciously the development of hymns for children.

“There are two ways of writing or speaking to children; the one is, to let ourselves

down to them; the other, to lift them up to us. Dr. Watts has wrote in the former way, and has succeeded admirably well, speaking to children as children, and leaving them as he found them. The following hymns are written on the other plan: they contain strong and manly sense, yet expressed in such plain and easy language as even children can understand. But when they do understand them, they will be children no longer, only in years and stature.” (Erik Routley, A Panorama of Christian Hymnody, The Liturgical Press, 1979, p.123).

Why is this quote so important when we are dealing with the Japanese hymnody? Because, hymnody for children in Japan are still under the influence of European and American hymnody, though the Hymnal for Children of UCCJ keeps certain degree of independence and uniqueness. So, first, let us explore the historical background in the English hymnody to find some relevance in the hymnody of Japan .

As Julian's A Dictionary of Hymnology (rpt. 1985, Kregel Publications, p. 219) says, it's true that “ we find ourselves at every step face to face with the difficulty of lack of materials” when we begin research into this filed. Although there seems no distinction between the hymns for adults and children until the 16th century, we find some evidences that children were important part of Christian worship and Christian community since its ancient days. The earliest example of Christian hymns which suggests this condition is even succeeded after 2000 years in The Hymnal 21 of the United Church of Christ in Japan . The Hymnal 21 is used inter-denominationally in Japan since its publication in 1997. For detailed information, please refer to “The Editorial Principles of The Hymnal 21 of the United Church of Christ in Japan ” in the IHA Bulletin No. 26 (1998). In this hymnal, you can find the hymn “Hitsujikai wa,” which is a translation of the “Shepard of tender youth” written in 1846 by Henry M. Dexter, an American congregational minister. The hymn depicts Christ as a shepard who calls us into one and who leads us to victory. But the text by Dexter is considered a free translation of one of the two Greek hymns included in “Paidagogos” (195?) by Clemens Alexandrius. It's an interesting example of the earliest Christian hymns surviving in Japan via a translated text in another language; however, it is difficult to say how the original ideas are transformed into the Japanese version.

After the reformation era, we begin to see more conscious effort in developing the hymns for children than ever. Even in German hymnody, Martin Luther assigns the first half of the hymn “Vom Himmel hoch, da komm ich her” to adults and the second half to children to sing. And in the English hymnody, many hymnals edited for children began to appear one after another.

The hymnologist Samuel J. Rogal lists 500 hymnals for children between the years 1655 to 1900 in England and 309 hymnals between 1753 to 1900 in the United States (*The Children's Jubilee: A Bibliographical Survey of Hymnals for Infants, Youth, and Sunday Schools Published in Britain and America, 1655-1900*, Greenwood Press, 1983). Among those historical hymnals, some collections are influential over others. Having 25 editions printed by the middle of the 18th century, *Divine Songs Attempted in Easy Language, for the Use of Children* (1715) by Watts is clearly one of them. Although there are many criticisms against this hymnal, Rogal tries to classify the 36 hymns in this collection into the 4 categories in defense of Watts : 1, Benefits derived from piety and prayer (19); 2, Consequences of disobeying God (9); 3, Appeal to God for assistance (5); 4, Recognition of God as guardian and protector (3). The following examples show some of Watts ' style.

Let the sweet work of prayer and praise Employ my youngest breath;

Thus I'm prepared for longer days, Or fit for early death. (category 1)

...read and pray While I have life and breath;

Lest I should be cut off today And sent t' eternal death. (category 2)

Although Watts did not intend for his hymns to beat religion into the hearts and the minds of children, negative reinforcement such as consequences of disobeying God or punishment must have been strongly imprinted into children of the time. When Wesley's *Hymns for Children* was published in 1763, the condition did not change much. Here are the first and the final stanzas of Charles Wesley's hymn for children entitled “Gentle Jesus” which is said to be the only lasting example of what he wrote with children in mind.

1, Lamb of God, I look to thee thou shalt my Example be;

thou art gentle, meek and mild, thou wast once a little child.

7, I shall then show forth thy praise, serve thee all my happy days;

then the world shall ever see, Christ the holy Child, in me.

While there is a clear difference in the style of Watts and Wesley in their approach to children, they share the same problem of drawing a line between adults and children and

trying to impose morality to children. Here we see a message of an adult trying to tell children how they should behave in a form of Christian hymn.

Michael Hawn sums up the problems of the past in the following way:

Children's hymnody has suffered in varying degrees when an adult-oriented posture has been assumed. The hymns of Watts and Wesleys, in spite of textual quality, were less effective because of this attitude. The use of negative patterns of theological reinforcement have not been

productive with children as a learning tool. An approach that is too direct and moralistic does not prove to be successful with children. Children appreciate quality and depth in their hymns when exposed to it. How the point is made is as significant as what point is made. Some hymnody for children during the growing Sunday School movement combined immediacy of textual content with singable, enjoyable tunes. While this appealed initially to the child, it did not offer content to grow on and music of lasting value. Finally, many of the hymns used with children lacked language that appealed to the child or images that were within the child's experience ("Hymnody for children: 1," The Hymn, Jan. 1985).

I basically agree with the five points he makes here, and especially points No. 3 and 5 are relevant to children's hymnody in Japan as well. These two points relate to the fact that "how" the message is expressed is as important as "what" message it has. In other words, when the message is expressed in the language that communicates directly to the experience and the imagination of children, it will become effective. The key to read current trends in the hymnody of children lies exactly in the transition "from what to how." If you are careful, you can see some examples that are successfully making this transition in the second half of the 20th century. For example, "The Clock Carol" by Paul Townsend tries to tell that God is with us everywhere, working and carrying His plans for the world. It begins with a simple imagination of a child wondering upon the time difference in the world and gradually develops to the message that God is center of the world embracing everyone. Here are the first three stanzas among the seven.

*When the bells chime noon in London , New York begins its day,
good morning in Toronto spells good-night for Mandalay .*

*When the sun shines on the pyramids, Alaska 's in the dark;
at one tick of the clock God hears both nightingale and lark.*

For he is there through nights and days, through rain and cold and heat;

behind the chatter of the clocks we sense his timeless beat.

Another example is “I’ve never seen an elephant” by Colin Gibson. The first stanza begins with “I’ve never seen an elephant, and an elephant’s never seen me. I can’t swing like a monkey can from the branch of a tropical tree...” It keeps on saying that certain animals can do things that I can not, but I can do things that they can not, and it concludes by singing “thank you God, for who they are and what they can and who I am and what I can.” There is a strong sense of self affirmation in this text which says “I am good as who I am, because God made me so.” I think that the hymn saves children from being caged by reservations that they have to obey their parents, they have to behave well, and they have to do this and that in order to be blessed by God. I personally think that this is indeed a unique hymn which ought to be shared widely.

Children's hymnody in Japan suffered in the same way. Especially because Christianity is new religion brought into Japan by the missionaries, and because the Christian population is still under 1 percent, succession of Christian faith in generation to generation is a very serious question.

In the 143 hymns of The Hymnal for Children of the UCCJ (1987), the predecessor of the 2002 edition, there are many 19th century hymns from Europe and America . However the origin of many of them are not even traceable these days. Besides well known hymns like “Savior, like a shepherd lead us” by Dorothy Thrupp, “What a friend we have in Jesus” by Joseph Scriven, and “Jesus loves me, this I know” by Anna. B. Warner, there are more than 100 hymns written by Japanese hymn writers. “Hikari, hikari” is one them. It invites a child to become a “child of light”, “bright and cheerful child of light,” “pure child of light,” “strong and healthy child of light,” and “right child of light who always tries to be right.” It almost gives you an impression that if you do not satisfy these conditions, you are out of God's blessing. Then, what can my youngest daughter do to be blessed by God when she can not breathe because of asthma and when coughs attack her all night that disturbs her from sleep? The hymn “Kami no megumi wo” uses such expressions like “We children of light, pure and bright, should work hard following Jesus who was loved by God and people. We children of God, brave and hopeful, should work hard to make the world of God come true.” The hymn “Watashitachi wa Chi no shio desu” even goes to say that “We are salt, fighting against sins and purify the world. We are the light, fighting against injustice and make this world bright and right.” There are many other hymns that do not reflect this kind of morality; but I introduce them as examples that come to contact with the points that Michael Hawn makes.

Fortunately the number of this kind of hymns is decreased in the 2002 edition. There are more hymns using the language that speaks directly to the experience and imagination of children. For example, the hymn “Esusama, kyou mo watashi wo” by Yohko Matsubara sings “Jesus calls me again today. Jesus encourages me to live again today by saying “There is nothing to be afraid. Just believe me and put your trust in me.” As you can see there is no condition or requirement that children have to fulfill before they get called by Jesus. And they do not have to work hard as children's army of God trying to purify the world. Instead the hymn affirms you that you are all right as who you are and you can live as who you are. “Kono hanano youni” by Jun Kawakami expresses kindness and love in Christian faith without pushing it to children. “I want to grow like a flower under the Sun. I want to be kind like the fragrance of the flower. I want to show the love of God gently like the flower.” Here you do not have to be

a “child of light” and “strong and healthy child of light” who always looks straight forward and who walks straight up to the lord. Also the modesty reflected in this text shows a kind of contrast compared to English and American hymns that are full of celebration. There is also a humorous hymn “Kyodaigenka wo shinaihi wa” by Hiroo Sakata. As being one of the texts that are succeeded from the previous edition, the hymn shares the world of children in humor and wonder that they may actually feel. “Why do I fight against my brother almost everyday? Tell me lord, why? Why do we fight so often among friends and also among those who do not each other? Tell me lord, why? When our heart is weak we tend to score each other; when we feel full of energy, we hate each other. Oh, how sad. Tell me lord, why? But at times, I feel like being kind to everybody. At times, I want to apologize everybody. Tell me lord, why?”

I certainly do not mean that “what” is expressed in the hymn is unimportant, but “how” it is expressed is indeed the key to read children's hymnody today.