

TEACHER'S GUIDE

Nine Sessions with the Ambassador Hymnal

A free companion to By Heart

A Layman Reads the Ambassador Hymnal

Nine sessions · forty-five minutes each

By **Larry Herzog Jr.**

Free for congregational use · larryherzogjr.com · *Ordinary Means*

What this is

Nine forty-five-minute sessions for an adult class, built entirely out of the hymnal already in your rack.

What you need: one *Ambassador Hymnal* per person. Nothing else. This guide reproduces no hymn texts, because everybody in the room already owns them - which is also why nothing here requires permission. Open the book and read from the page.

Who can teach it: anyone who can read aloud and keep time. You do not need to have read *By Heart*, and you do not need to be a musician. Each session gives you the aim, the numbers, the questions, the timing, and what to say if the room goes quiet.

Whether to sing: sing if you can, even badly, even without an instrument. A hymn read aloud is a poem; a hymn sung is what these sessions are actually about. If your class will not sing, have one person read the stanza slowly while everyone follows in the book.

One session needs a particular teacher. Session seven asks about hymns that have wounded people. It needs somebody who will notice if a person in the room goes quiet, and who will find them afterward.

Four cautions – read these before session one

This is not a class about which hymns your congregation should stop singing. If it becomes that, stop the class. The moment somebody says “well, we sang 441 last month” in a certain tone of voice, you have traded a good thing for a small one.

Never name the person who picks the hymns. In most congregations that is the pastor or the organist, and both of them are in the room or will hear about it by Tuesday.

Do not let anyone leave feeling that his favorite hymn has been taken away from him. Every session closes with singing, and the closing hymn is always one that gives rather than asks. That is deliberate. Do not skip it to save time.

You are teaching a tool, not a credential. A class that finishes this plan should be more able to hear what it sings and no more pleased with itself than when it started.

The three questions

These are the spine of sessions six through nine. Write them where the class can see them and leave them up for the whole nine weeks. There is a page at the back of this guide you can tear out and put on the wall.

1. **Who is the subject of the verbs?** Not who the hymn is about - who is actually doing things in the sentences.
2. **What does the hymn ask you to supply?** Every hymn asks for something, and most of what they ask for is fine. The question is whether the hymn makes what you supply into the hinge on which the outcome turns.
3. **Where does the hymn locate assurance?** When you cannot feel anything, what does the hymn point you at? Something outside you, that happened to you, that can be named and dated and did not depend on your cooperation? Or something inside you, that you have to remember correctly and keep producing?

At a glance

	Session	Hymns you will open	Closing hymn
1	The book in the rack	preface p. vii, contents	410
2	How to read a hymn	141, 258, 424, 263, 601, 618, 8, 11	260
3	Two streams, one cover	433, 436, 443, 480, 1, 9	258
4	What the chorales confess	141, 260, 258, 294, 410, 297	141
5	The sacraments sung	270, 272, 273, 276, 278, 279, 294, 584	276
6	The invitation hymns	417, 424, 426, 427, 428	428
7	The consecration hymns	441, 460, 487, 468	468
8	The year sung	contents, 80, 81, 79, 72, 71, 78, pp. 57-70	11
9	Singing the whole book	604, 574, 568, 584, 432	624

Session 1 – The book in the rack

Aim: that everyone in the room look at the hymnal itself, probably for the first time.

Open to page vii. Read the preface aloud, the whole thing; it is short. Then read it again, slowly, stopping at the four criteria the committee set for itself.

Ask: - The first line quotes our own Declaration of Faith from 1962. What does it say a hymn book is *for*? - The committee says hymns must be in keeping with our Lutheran understanding of the Sacraments. What would that rule out, if you applied it strictly? - Why do you think they chose to put quotation marks around the word “gospel” in “gospel hymnody”? - The last paragraph says they decided to name none of the people who made this book. What do you make of that?

Then turn to the table of contents and simply read the section names and the number ranges aloud. Let the room hear how the book is organized. Point out the heading *Means of Grace*, and that only three things are under it.

Say, if it helps: this book was made because in the 1980s congregations in our association were replacing their Lutheran hymnals with books from outside the tradition, and a handful of people spent six years and almost no money building something we would keep. It largely worked.

Take home: count the hymns in the baptism section. Count the hymns for death and burial. Bring the numbers next week.

Close by singing 410, *Salvation Unto Us Has Come*, stanzas 1 and 2.

Teacher's notes

Session 2 - How to read a hymn

Aim: that everyone learn to read the small print at the bottom of the page.

Open to 141. Read the credit line aloud, all of it, including the tune name and the numbers. Explain the five pieces: text and author, translator, tune, tune name, meter.

Then do the meter. Count the syllables of the first two lines with the class. Then turn to **258** and show them the same tune and the same meter under a completely different text. Then **424** and **263**, which share a tune across two sections. Then **601** and **618**.

Ask: - If two hymns have the same meter, what can you do? - Read down the right margin for a few pages. What language are those tune names in, and why?

Now the exercise that will wake the room up. Turn to **8** and read the credit line. Then turn to **11** and read that one. Ask what changed.

Let them find it. Hymn 8 names no English translator; hymn 11 names him. It is the same hymn and the same man. Somebody's name fell out between one page and another.

Say: nobody did that on purpose, every book has such things, and you just found one in ten seconds with no training at all. That is the skill.

Take home: pick any hymn you sang last Sunday and read the bottom of the page. Who wrote it? When? Was it translated? Is there an *alt.*?

Close by singing 260, *Lord, Keep Us Steadfast in Thy Word*, all three stanzas.

Teacher's notes

Session 3 – Two streams, one cover

Aim: that the class understand where the hymns in this book came from.

Open to 433. Read the credit line: an American gospel poet, a Swedish folk tune, a Norwegian tune name. Then **436** - a Danish bishop on a German chorale melody. Then **443** - a Norwegian hymn translated by two people who were alive when this hymnal was printed. Then **480** - an English text on a Norwegian folk tune.

Say: the two traditions in this book did not drift together. Somebody married them, page by page, on purpose.

Then tell the story briefly. Our congregations sang out of the *Concordia Hymnal* of 1932 for two generations. By the 1980s it was being replaced by evangelical songbooks. The committee that built this book divided the work: some members went through the Lutheran hymnals, and one member went through the evangelical ones and brought back what was worth keeping.

Then turn to 1 and 9. Read both first lines. They are the same German hymn, written in 1642, in two English translations - one that the whole English-speaking church sings, and one that came to us through the Norwegian-American church. The committee kept both.

Ask: - Why would a committee keep two versions of the same hymn? - What does that tell you about who this book was made for?

Take home: find one hymn whose text and tune come from different countries.

Close by singing 258, *God's Word Is Our Great Heritage*.

Teacher's notes

Session 4 – What the chorales confess

Aim: that the class hear the grammar of the Reformation hymns.

Open to 141, 260, 258, 294, and 410. Read a stanza of each aloud. After each one, ask the same question: *who is doing things in these sentences?*

Write the answers on a board if you have one. The answer will be the same every time.

Say: God is the subject, the singer is the object, and the verbs are done to him. He is kept, defended, owned, fed, led, baptized, given. Where he acts at all, he asks or believes or gives thanks - and each of those is a response to something already in his hands.

Then look at 294 more closely. Read the third stanza and the fifth. Ask why a hymn with a font in it is filed under *Church, Ministry*.

Now be fair. Turn to **297**, which is by the same Danish bishop who gave us 270 and 276. Read the third and fourth stanzas. Ask the same question: who is doing things now?

Say: old does not mean safe. This is a seventeenth-century chorale by an author we admire, and it spends three stanzas telling us what we must do. Everything in it is true. But if it were all you sang, you would end up somewhere else than 410 would take you.

Take home: nothing this week. Let session four sit.

Close by singing 141, *A Mighty Fortress*, stanzas 1 and 4.

Teacher's notes

Session 5 – The sacraments sung

Aim: that the class find what their hymnal says about baptism and the Supper, and notice how little of it they have sung.

Open the table of contents to the *Means of Grace* heading. Baptism, 270 to 274. The Lord's Supper, 275 to 286. Five hymns and twelve.

Read 270 aloud - both stanzas. Then **272**, both stanzas. Then **273**, the first two.

Ask: - In 272, how many things does the singer do? How many does God do? - 273 is sung over an infant. What does the congregation claim is happening? - Have you ever sung any of these except at a baptism?

Now the Supper. Read **276** aloud - it is two stanzas and it is the whole Lutheran confession. Then read **278**, and ask what the singer is doing in that hymn. Then **279**, third stanza, and ask what is different.

Say: 277 and 278 are lovely hymns written by men who did not believe what we believe about the Supper, and 279 is by an Englishman who states it more plainly than any German in the section. You cannot tell from the author's country. You have to read the words.

Then the exercise. Turn to the hymn topics index in the back and find *Baptism*. Read the entry aloud - the section range and the four additional hymns it lists. Then turn to **294** and read the third stanza, and to **584** and read the refrain about the baptismal dower.

Ask why neither of those is in the index entry.

Take home: ask your pastor when the congregation last sang 272 or 276.

Close by singing 276.

Teacher's notes

Session 6 – The invitation hymns

Aim: that the class learn the three questions and use them on hymns they love.

This is the session where the class either works or does not. Go slowly and be kind.

Teach the test first. Write the three questions where everyone can see them:

1. Who is the subject of the verbs?
2. What does the hymn ask you to supply?
3. Where does the hymn locate assurance?

Then open to 417 and run the test together. This is the right place to start because *Just As I Am* passes: the whole hymn is a denial that the singer brings anything.

Then turn to 424 and run it again. Christ speaks in every stanza; every sentence is *come, and I will give*.

Now the spread at 426. Have everyone look at the whole page opening at once, without singing. Read the third stanza of **426**. Then read the second stanza of **427**, directly beneath it. Then read the first stanza of **428** on the facing page.

Ask: - In 426, what makes the difference between the two men? - 427 is printed four inches below it. What does it say makes the difference? - 428 opens on the narrow gate. Where does it end up?

Say: these three are on one page opening in your own hymnal, and they do not agree. You did not need me to tell you that. You needed somebody to ask you to look.

Take home: run the three questions on any hymn, old or new, and bring it next week.

Close by singing 428.

Teacher's notes

Session 7 – The consecration hymns

Aim: that the class hear what the surrender hymns ask, and that nobody leave wounded.

Read the cautions at the top of this guide again before you teach this one.

Open to 441. Read stanza one aloud, and then the refrain. Ask who the hymn is speaking to - an unbeliever, or a Christian who is trying?

Ask, gently: - What does this hymn say is the reason a person does not have rest? - How would you know when your all was on the altar?

Let the silence sit. Somebody in the room has lived this.

Then say the true thing, and do not wait: peace is not something we generate by the completeness of our yielding. It is a verdict handed down about us from outside us, on the basis of a death we did not die.

Then be fair, because the section is not all one thing. Turn to **460** and read it. Every verb is an imperative addressed to God - mold, make, search, wash, touch, heal, fill. It is a prayer from beginning to end. Then **487**, and read the refrain: ask the Savior to help you; He is willing.

Then 468, and this is the point of the session. Read the second stanza. *Nothing I bring*. It was written by an American holiness-movement songwriter, in the same decade as 441.

Ask: what is the difference between these two hymns, if it is not the century, the country, or the kind of tune?

Take home: nothing. Send them home with 468.

Close by singing 468.

Teacher's notes

Session 8 – The year sung

45 minutes. Prep: none beyond your own hymnal.

Aim: that the class see the largest structure in the book, and understand that a calendar is a protection.

(5 min) Open the table of contents and read the church year sections and their ranges aloud - Advent through Other Special Days, 1 to 170. Then say the number: one hundred seventy hymns, more than a quarter of the book.

(5 min) Ask: how many of those do you think we have sung in the last five years?

Let them guess. The honest answer in most congregations is between twenty and thirty.

(15 min) Now walk the Lent section reading only the credit lines. Do not read the hymns; read the small print, in order, and let the class hear the range:

- **80** - Theoctistus of the Studium, about the year 890, translated by John Mason Neale, on a tune harmonized by Bach.
- **81** - Girolamo Savonarola, who died in 1498, translated by an Irish poet.
- **79** - Paul Gerhardt, on a melody by Heinrich Isaac, who died in 1517.
- **72** - an American folk hymn out of *Southern Harmony*, 1835.
- **71** - Fanny Crosby. Have someone find the Spanish stanza printed under it.
- **78** - *The Old Rugged Cross*.

Ask: what do these six have in common? The answer is: nothing except the cross. On that one subject the two traditions in this book have never disagreed.

(10 min) Then turn to the front matter. Page 57 is a plan for reading the Bible in a year. Page 65 is the traditional series of Scripture readings. Page 70 is the lectionary - the appointed readings for every Sunday of the church year, printed in the pew book.

Ask whether anyone in the room knew those were there.

(5 min) Say: the alternative to a calendar is a list of favorites. When a congregation stops letting the year decide what it sings, preference decides - and preference selects for hymns that make us feel something. The year is a set of banks. It says: it is Advent, so we sing about a coming we did not arrange. It is Easter, so we sing about a body that got up without our help. You cannot write a self-improvement hymn about the incarnation. There is nothing in it for the singer to do.

Take home: open to hymn 1 and read it. Then read hymn 9. They are the same German hymn in two English translations.

(5 min) Close by singing 11, *Savior of the Nations, Come* - Ambrose, in Luther's German, on the melody that has carried it since 1524.

Teacher's notes

Session 9 – Singing the whole book

Aim: that the class leave with the tool and without a new burden.

Open to 604 and read it aloud. *I know of a sleep in Jesus' name*. Then **574**, and explain that *suffer* there means *permit*. Then **568**, which everyone knows. Then **584**: peace was our baptismal dower, peace shall bless our dying hour.

Ask: - Take the hymns from session seven into a hospital room. What happens to them? - Now take these four. What is different?

Say: every verb in the surrender hymns needs a Christian with strength to spend. These four ask nothing at all, because they were written for the day when there is nothing left to give.

Then the two rules, and say them plainly:

The test measures the hymn, not the singer. Your grandmother sang *I Surrender All* for sixty years and died trusting Christ, because the preaching and the catechism and the Supper were working on her too.

A hymn can fail the test and still be worth singing. 432 is imperative from beginning to end, and a congregation that never sings anything like it will raise Christians who think discipleship costs nothing.

Then the warning, and do not soften it: if anyone leaves this class grading the hymn board on Sunday morning, we have taken a good thing and made it into a small one. The test is a tuning fork. It tells you about the pitch. It does not make you a musician and it does not make you righteous.

Finally, what to do. Sing the whole book. Ask for the sections nobody opens - the five baptism hymns, the twelve for the Supper, the six for the grave. When you have a hand in choosing, put something that gives before something that asks. And read the small print out loud to your children.

Close by singing 624, *Behold the Host Arrayed in White* - and tell them, before you sing it, that the tune was arranged by Edvard Grieg and has been in their pew rack the whole time.

Teacher's notes

Notes for the teacher

If someone gets angry. Somebody may take session six or seven personally, especially if a hymn under discussion is one they came to faith singing. The answer is not to defend the analysis. The answer is: *God used that hymn to bring you to Christ, and He is not embarrassed by it, and neither am I. The question in this class is narrower - what a text teaches when it is all a person gets.* Then move on, and find that person after class.

If the room will not talk. Read the stanza a second time and ask one person to say what the singer is doing in it. That question always gets an answer.

If you run out of time, cut the take-home and the discussion, never the closing hymn.

If you only have eight weeks, cut session three and fold its two best moments - hymn 433's credit line and the pair at 1 and 9 - into sessions two and eight. Do not cut session eight; the church year is the least contested material in the plan and the easiest place for a wary class to relax.

What to hand out. Nothing. The hymnal is the handout. If you want something for the wall, write the three questions on a sheet of paper and leave it up for the eight weeks.

If you are asked what book this came from. *By Heart: A Layman Reads the Ambassador Hymnal*. You do not need it to teach these sessions. It is the long version of the same argument, with the sources.

Cut this out and put it up for nine weeks.

Three questions to ask of any hymn

1. Who is the subject of the verbs?

Not who the hymn is about - who is actually doing things in the sentences.

2. What does the hymn ask you to supply?

Every hymn asks for something, and most of it is fine. Does the hymn make what you supply into the hinge on which the outcome turns?

3. Where does the hymn locate assurance?

When you cannot feel anything, what does the hymn point you at? Something outside you, that happened to you, that did not depend on your cooperation? Or something inside you, that you must remember correctly and keep producing?

The test measures the hymn, not the singer. A hymn can fail it and still be worth singing.
