

A NEW HYMN-BOOK IN PROSPECT

At a recent meeting of the Congregational Council it was agreed to recommend the Assembly of the Congregational Union of England and Wales, in May, to take steps towards the preparation of a new hymn-book. The one at present in use – *The Congregational Hymnary* – was published in 1916. It succeeded another which had been in use for twenty-three years before revision was undertaken. The average life of a hymn book is about a quarter of a century. Within that space of time the best of collections goes to some extent out of date. It is not surprising, therefore, that progressive spirits among Congregationalists feel that their present book is fully ripe for revision.

“The present collection,” says one critic, “contains more than a due proportion of dead wood which might well be excised in favour of some living grafts.” Wireless services have made people familiar with many of the newer hymns which have leapt into wide popularity; and the absence of these from the book now in use, while it need not create the sense of inferiority to which one writer confesses, does make many feel that they are deprived of much that enriches the worship of other branches of the Church. This applies even more to the music. The present book suffers from the strong influence of the Victorian period which was still dominant when it was produced. In this respect it “dates” quite markedly, for all later hymn-books have made a striking extension of the range of choice in the selection of tunes.

In certain preliminary newspaper discussions it was urged that the opportunity should be taken to produce, not another denominational hymn book, but “a common hymn-book with the same hymns and tunes sung in all churches, Anglican and Nonconformist.” With the plaint of one writer there will be general sympathy: “It makes one perfectly ill to hear half a dozen references to different hymn-books at wireless services.” It is understood that this feeling is to be met by the issue of a carefully selected and really catholic collection for use in broadcast services; this is now in preparation.

A plea was made for the adoption of *Songs of Praise* as “eminently suitable to be the hymn-book of a reunited Church or of any denomination, and particularly of Congregationalism, since it represents the liberal catholic outlook of Percy Dearmer’s later days.” When the pleader went on, however, to ask whether this outlook was not the reason “why the Anglo-Catholics are chary of using it,” he put his finger on one reason among many why that book, with all its merits, fails to fulfil the requirements of a hymn-book for common use.

The editors of the new collection will have an opportunity of profiting by the mistakes of those who produced other collections now in use, as well as by the gains achieved by them. They ought thus to provide for churches of the Congregational order one of the finest hymn-books of modern times.

COMMENT from A Gaunt: Due to the outbreak of war, this new Congregational book (Congregational Praise) was not published until 1951. But in the 1950s it was generally thought to be ‘one of the finest hymn books of modern times’, as predicted [see above].