

## MUSIC

# Singing to God

*Traditions run deep in songs used in Plain Sect services*

**ERIN NEGLEY**  
ENEGLEY@LNPNEWS.COM

Four hundred years ago, the ancestors of the song leaders who recently gathered in an Ephrata-area church likely would have sung the same hymns in the same way.

They would have been sung in German, with a cadence slow enough to sound like a dirge.

But the hymns and the singing style changed as different religious sects were created.

The singing styles that were on display when Amish, Mennonite and Brethren song leaders gathered in that Ephrata-area church were as diverse as the leaders themselves. Some hymns were sung at a slow pace, with each syllable drawn out; others were

fast and sung in four-part harmony.

But music is a common bond and the night of singing was a way for members of the different sects to share and connect.

"We're all different personalities. We're all different temperaments," says John Dietz, a local Old Order River Brethren song leader. "Singing is **SONGS**, page B12



SUZETTE WENGER | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Song leaders from various Christian faiths in Lancaster County recently came together to share hymns.

# Songs: *Combined hymn sing*

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one way of merging that.”

Bishop David Sauder, also of the Old Order River Brethren, started the hymn sing with a prayer, thanking God for the gift of song.

“For an eternity, singing is significant here and in heaven,” he says. “We want to thank the Lord for the privilege to do something that will carry over into eternity.”

Every couple of years, Lancaster Mennonite Historical Society and the Swiss Pioneer Associates host a combined hymn sing. At the most recent one, held at Martindale Mennonite Fellowship Center in Ephrata Township, song leaders from several local congregations gathered around a singing table borrowed from a Churchtown group. These tables sit at the center of churches throughout Lancaster County. There, male song leaders lead a service’s music.

Each hymn is an avenue to praise God and share the traditions of a congregation.

“We sing to the Lord and then we also sing to our fellow men,” says James Nolt, of Ephrata, who is a song leader with the Weaverland Mennonite Conference. “We encourage and inspire each other.”

Here is more about some of the hymns shared at the church. To listen to the songs, go to LancasterOnline.

## Old Order Amish

**“As Jesus Christ, the Son of God,”** from Page 217 of the Ausbund.

Written in 1564, the Ausbund is one of the oldest Protestant songbooks, and it’s still used by Old Order Amish.

Some of the reasons behind the sect’s singing tradition are not known even to those who follow what’s been passed down.

“When we sing, our leaders sing the first syllable by themselves,” an Amish song leader says. “And then the whole congregation pitches in on the second syllable. Why that is, I don’t know.”

For generations, Amish songbooks did not have musical notes. The songs are learned by ear. Then a group came along with the idea that these hymns should be preserved. They painstakingly recorded the notes for the sake of history and the church.

“We are getting closer and more unified, as a community. We’re singing more and more as a whole and

our younger generations are now relying on the notes to keep these tunes preserved,” the song leader says. “Before there was a little bit of arguments: ‘My grandfather always sang the songs right. Sam’s grandfather had a little bit disoriented.’ With the notes, it unifies our community and I appreciate that and most of our people do appreciate that.”

In the Amish style of singing, each syllable of the hymns, in German, is drawn out.

At the end of one long song, one of the song leaders asked, “As you listen to the singing here, does it surprise you that an Amish service lasts three hours; Old Order Mennonites, two hours; and Lancaster conference, one hour?”

## Old Order River Brethren

**“Jesus My Shepherd.”**

How do these hymns fit into a church service? Dietz, an Old Order River Brethren song leader, kept track on a recent Sunday and counted 20 hymns that were sung at a service.

The bishop opened the service with a song. A deacon opened the testimony with a song. A hymn was sung with each testimony from a dozen church members. A song started the main sermon, a song closed the service and there were table songs before and after the meal.

As the congregation moved away from German, members still wanted to keep some of the old songs, like “Jesus my Shepherd.” So they translated them into English.

As one of nine song leaders, Dietz leads the hymns about once every two months. Song leaders pick the song and then the tune to go with it because their songbooks do not have musical notes.

For the combined hymn sing, he selected “Jesus My Shephard,” partially because of the tune and partially because of the words.

“It specifically referenced Jesus, and that’s the ultimate,” Dietz says after finishing the hymns.

## Groffdale Mennonite Conference

**No title.**

The Groffdale congregations use a songbook that’s been updated many times since it was first created in 1804.

Song leaders sing the first few lines of each song before the congrega-

tion joins in.

This song with no title is based on Psalm 130 and was written in the 1600s. It is rooted in the past, but there’s a contemporary version in English.

“The style leans towards Old Order way of singing, with slurring up and down in anticipation of the next note,” one of the song leaders says. “Let’s sing the first two verses in German, the Old Order way, then sing the third verse in English in a contemporary way and switch back to the Old Order Way.”

## Weaverland Mennonite Conference

**“Walking with God”**

Elvin Huber, a song leader from Reinholds, shared two songs during the hymn sing: one with notes and one without. Song leaders don’t always use the suggested tune and can make changes as they like.

“Walking with God” is a hymn often sung in church, and he wanted to share it.

“It means a lot to me because, oftentimes, it fits well with the sermon,” he says after the hymn sing. “And we’re striving to look for a closer walk with God, so the words are very fitting.”

## Church of the Brethren

**“Take My Hand and Lead Me, Father.”**

This song was written by William Beery, who was born in 1852 when the Brethren only sang in unison, in German and in the style of Old Order sects without printed notes.

In the 1860s, the church started allowing singing in parts.

“To do that, they had to teach people how to sing. They started singing schools,” the song leader says. “And they taught singing with the notes. So that’s when the notes started coming in and four-part harmonies.”

Instruments started being introduced in the early and middle part of the 20th century. Yet, some congregations continue to sing a cappella, without instruments.

This hymn first appeared in a 1901 hymnal. Hymns also can change.

“In the 1925 and 1955 hymnal, they chopped it in half and took the chorus away,” the song leader says. “When the Mennonites and Brethren got together to produce a hymnal in 1992, they put the chorus back in.”