

Over the Back Fence  
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Approx 635 words

Those good ol' hymns  
By Alva Wood

Rev. Sid Carter used to go and stand at the door to shake hands with her parishioners as they left the church on Sunday mornings. But too often she found herself standing there as lonely as Homer Simpson at a gay pride party. She had no one to shake hands with, because they were all at the other end of the hall having coffee with each other.

People felt sorry for her, standing all by herself. They came over to shake her hand. But after they had said, "Great sermon this morning, Reverend," there didn't seem much more to say. And they couldn't go back in to have coffee, because then they would have to pass Sid again on their way out. So they scurried through the door, as if they were being shooed out.

Besides, Sid felt it seemed silly to greet people when there were only a dozen or so of them, and she'd been talking to them for over an hour already.

So now, when the service ends, Sid just heads over to the coffee pot, and people join her. Once in a while they actually discuss her sermon. She finds that a rare treat.

But what she gets most often is, "I wish we sang more of the good old hymns."

Sometimes it's put the other way around: "Why do we have to sing so many of these new songs?"

Sid's given up explaining that the words of some of the old hymns make her gag. And some of the old melodies sound more suitable for a funeral. Four-part harmonies are gorgeous, she agrees, but the only person who attempts the bass line is Ollie Armitage, and mostly he croaks along on the same note like a bullfrog in spring.

So Sid announced that Sunday's service was going to be an old-time singalong. "You've been asking for some of the great old hymns," she warned the congregation the Sunday before. "Next weekend, we'll sing at least ten of them."

Quite a few people didn't bother coming at all. A few others showed up who hadn't been in church in years.

Sid called out the hymns, and Rosie Green pounded them out on the piano. To make it a worship service, Sid sandwiched in a couple of prayers, a brief scripture reading, and the offering.

Over coffee, she waited for the chronic complainers to thank her for letting them sing their old favorites.

Florence Armitage came first. "I hated *Jesus Loves Me* when I was a child," she told Sid. "I never thought of myself as 'weak'."

Terry Brown drifted over. "I never realized before," he muttered, "what a mean-spirited S.o.B. Martin Luther was."

"You didn't like *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*?" Sid asked.

"It's not about God at all," said Terry. "It's about the power of Satan."

As Sid was recovering from that, Aynsley Kastor drifted over. "If the only songs those old Presbyterians sang were metrical psalms," she said, "I can understand why people call the Scots 'dour'."

"Did you know," asked Nellie Rinehart, "that in a U.S. survey of the hymns that people loved most or hated most, the same hymn topped both lists?"

"No," said Sid. "What was it?"

"*The Old Rugged Cross*," said Nellie.

It wasn't hard to guess which list she would put it on.

Tessa Vanderkam is a convert to feminism and inclusive language. She didn't like *Faith of our Fathers*. "Didn't our mothers have any faith?" she demanded.

The final straw came from 24-year-old Julie Burkholder-Smith. "I thought we were going to sing great old hymns," she said. "But where did that ghastly militaristic thing come from?"

"*Onward Christian Soldiers*?" Sid asked. "Have you never heard it before?"

"Nope," said Julie. "And I hope I never hear it again!"