

# An Interview with Mary Louise VanDyke

This interview was conducted by Carol Pemberton, Director of Research, at the Dictionary of American Hymnology (DAH) office in Mudd Library, Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio, on November 19, 1993

**THE HYMN:** Mary Louise, please tell me about your background.

**VanDyke:** I'm a graduate of Oberlin College Conservatory and have master's degrees in music education and sacred music from Case Western Reserve and Kent State universities. A lot of my career has involved directing children's choirs. I'm proud of founding the Northern Ohio Chapter of the Chorister's Guild, and I've just completed six years on the Chorister's Guild National Board.

**THE HYMN:** How did you become the coordinator of the DAH?

**VanDyke:** I had always been interested in Leonard Ellinwood's work. Back in 1983, when I realized Oberlin's collection had not been included in the DAH, I compiled a bibliography of hymnals in our Special Collections and sent a copy to him. I guess it came along at the right moment, for a few years later, when he was ready to retire, he named me as his successor.

**THE HYMN:** How did you get space here at the college?

**VanDyke:** I had to go to bat for it. It seemed wisest to go first to Bill Moffett, Oberlin College Librarian—the Bill Moffett, now Director of the Huntington Library, who has made the Dead Sea Scrolls available to worldwide scholarship. I told him of the wonderful opportunity offered to us if he could give us some space. No way could he give us room for a million and a half index cards. When I suggested office space, he played the devil's advocate, asking, "What's it going to mean to Oberlin? How can I justify giving your project a space that others are asking for?" I was encouraged by John Druessedow, the Conservatory Librarian, so I persevered. Finally he said, "Well, OK, if you can find a place for the cards." Then I had to go to churches in town to try to find storage space for the cards. The Board of Trustees of The First Church (Charles G. Finney's historic church) listened, discussed insurance, what would happen in case of a fire, vandalism, etc., and found a room we could use. I'll never forget the day in '84 when the truck arrived in the midst of a heavy rain, and my husband, Don, carried 700 heavy file boxes into the basement of the church, where



*Mary Louise VanDyke, Coordinator of the Dictionary of American Hymnology project; Carol Pemberton, Director of Research, The Hymn Society. In the DAH office, Oberlin College.*

they still are. Ray English, Moffett's successor, and the college have continued to sponsor the project wholeheartedly; I can't begin to tell you the extent of the support we have had from them these ten years.

**THE HYMN:** You mentioned an interesting point about insurance on those cards at the church.

**VanDyke:** Now that the entire card index of first lines is on microfilm, they're not as vulnerable; but I would hate to see something happen to them. Sometimes I prefer to work with the cards; several can be pulled and compared. And I can add information to the cards.

**THE HYMN:** And make corrections?

**VanDyke:** Yes, I keep a file of things to add or change when and if we go into a second edition. I stand in awe of Leonard's thorough editing; his hand is on every card.

**THE HYMN:** How many assistants do you think Ellinwood had?

**VanDyke:** I don't know. He had scholars from all over the country help him, and he always gave special credit to Elizabeth Lockwood, who also worked at the Library of Congress.

**THE HYMN:** Did Leonard Ellinwood get out here after you took over the DAH project?

**VanDyke:** He and his wife, Lera, were our houseguests when the changeover took place. The Episcopal Church prepared a choral Evensong service where he at one point handed me a symbolic box of cards. It was a lovely transfer. But I don't believe he ever got back here after that.

**THE HYMN:** Ellinwood picked up certain kinds of information, starting with the first lines of hymns.

**VanDyke:** That's right, texts beginning as far back as the 1640 *Bay Psalm Book*. Ellinwood had readers, people from all over North America, indexing hymns, which is what I am still trying to continue. He drew on the materials in various major libraries, plus private collections. He rightly limited the indexing to the hymn itself, meaning literally, the text. But I have so many calls for tunes, that I just thought it was better to go ahead and index the tunes, too. Ellinwood included texts in many languages, any language in the Roman alphabet.

**THE HYMN:** Are native American languages represented?

**VanDyke:** Yes, and many others. There must be at least fifty of them. I've been having people code the languages for me. We're doing this on computer, so I have some codes for languages.

**THE HYMN:** Since the DAH moved to Oberlin, you have added information about tunes and a file on authors and translators. So you've gone well beyond Ellinwood's work.

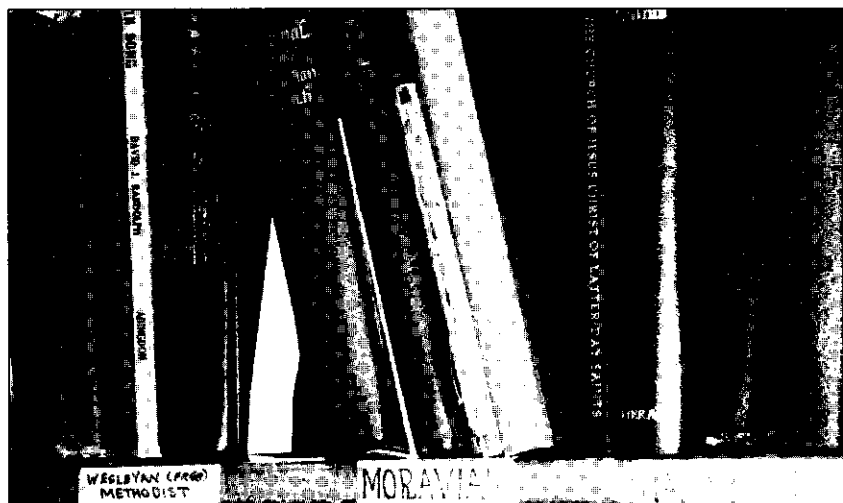
**VanDyke:** Well, yes, as a need arises, I keep adding. It seems to me that's why the essay file is bulging. When I inherited it, it was largely denominational essays, except a few topics; but as requests came in, it was obvious that other topics were of interest to hymnologists.

**THE HYMN:** Besides those essay files in the file cabinet, what else is available here?

**VanDyke:** There's the biographical file on authors and translators. When that file came to Oberlin, every entry was clear and succinct. I'm sure Leonard had condensed it to something that could be published as a biographical dictionary of hymn writers.

**THE HYMN:** Have others worked on revising that material?

**VanDyke:** Many people have. Hugh McKellar has been here from Canada. If we had more people like Hugh, the files would be in great shape. I can send Hugh twenty-five to thirty of these messy folders, and he just has a knack for putting it all together and writing a good biography from all



this information. So I keep throwing the stuff in there that I get, and hoping that either Hugh or someone like him will do the writing.

**THE HYMN:** I presume that much of your time is spent on responding to inquiries, probably from all over the world.

**VanDyke:** That's right. We work closely with The Hymn Society of Great Britain and Ireland, with the Australian Hymnal Committee, with editors of Canadian hymnals, a South American hymnal, and the companion for the hymnal of the British Salvation Army as well as with individuals in many lands who look to us to provide information on North American hymnody. And recently in the U.S., we've researched materials for many denominations that are publishing new hymnals and companions—Churches of Christ, Mennonites, United Church of Christ, Buddhists, Methodists, Episcopalians, etc. We've researched materials for the Phillips Collection in [Washington] D.C. and Monsanto in St. Louis.

**THE HYMN:** You help people who are compiling hymnals, but even more interesting and touching are the personal inquiries and then the responses that you get.

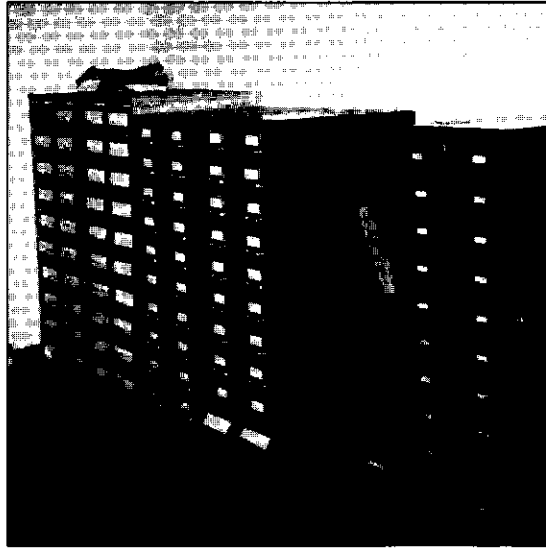
**VanDyke:** Well, I want to say that we treat every inquiry the same whether it's a little pencil scratch on a scrap of paper or whether it's on embossed institutional stationery. But I do get a lot of queries from people who want to hear something before they die or have something sung at their funerals or hear something that they heard at their mothers' knees. And I have been recently getting a lot of people who are researching their families.

**THE HYMN:** Do you have an example?

**VanDyke:** Here's a recent one—a woman researching her great-grandfather's diary. She wanted to know more about two hymns he'd described as his favorites. I eventually found both hymns for her, but it took a long time because all she had were the refrains. I've learned to ask questions that help place the hymn in time and

*Resources on the shelves in the DAH office.*

*The basement of The First Church in Oberlin, Ohio. First-line cards from Ellinwood's era. End of the alphabet.*



*The beginning of the first-line cards from Ellinwood's era. Beginning with A's at the far left.*

space and perhaps even within a denomination; but even then, it's like finding a needle in a haystack. I saved her thank you note. She wrote, "I'm really glad your project exists. Otherwise a lot of fine old hymns...would simply die out and along with them the lives and memories of countless people who loved them. In a world that's changing so fast, it's nice to have something permanent." Thanks come via e-mail and airmail, by phone or postcard, and in touching letters like this one.

**THE HYMN:** Some of the inquiries concern hymnals rather than specific hymns, do they not?

**VanDyke:** Hymnal collectors write and say, "I've just bought this book and the title page is missing. What is it?" That's fun.

**THE HYMN:** When you learn of a hymnal that you are not familiar with, do you seek it out and get somebody to index it?

**VanDyke:** All new hymnals are farmed out to be indexed in St. Louis, Austin, or Elyria as soon as this office receives a copy. The indexers now are putting data on floppies and sending them to me. A wonderful person living in this area, Margaret

Miller,<sup>1</sup> has the record for indexing the most hymnals. I don't really have assistants, but Margaret Miller is probably the person to whom I turn the most. Some of the older hymnals that have not been indexed may need to be. Leonard did not index tunebooks. One of his criteria was that an indexed text should be strophic, and as you know, a lot of hymns in tunebooks used only the first stanzas. But others included lots of stanzas. To be really thorough, perhaps we should index tunebooks. Leonard did not index collections of hymns by a single author or supplements. Perhaps we need to re-evaluate those, too.

**THE HYMN:** He had his hands full just to get this first big sweep.

**VanDyke:** Yes, and he did his job so well. I can't believe the thoroughness of this man. He must have worked twenty-four hours a day because you can see his hand on those cards, editing. He went over every card that was done, no matter by whom.

**THE HYMN:** Now do you go over every card that's done? And how many people are helping you?

**VanDyke:** Well, in order to continue and complete the author file, it took eighteen volunteers two years. We had people typing, we had people filing, and we just took over a big room and simply spread out.

**THE HYMN:** How many cards do you have in the author file?

**VanDyke:** About 121,000 so far.

**THE HYMN:** The two years spent on the file of authors and translators, when was that?

**VanDyke:** It was soon after I started. Leonard said something about needing an author file. That was his first charge. I would say roughly that it was finished between '88 and '89.

**THE HYMN:** The important thing is that it's done, and that it's updated constantly.

**VanDyke:** Then I extracted from that file my bibliography of women hymn writers. The First-line Index stops at 1978. So Margaret Miller incorporated names from newly published hymnals as she or someone else indexed them. For each woman, we can look up her name to find other names by which she was known, when she was born, her nationality, her denomination, as well as first lines of her texts and when they were published. Let's look at Margaret Aamodt. The bibliography tells us she was born in 1910, was an American, was a Lutheran, and was also known as Mrs. H. Oscar Aamodt; and these are the first lines of her hymns and the dates they were published.

**THE HYMN:** Some of this information must have taken a lot of digging on your part.

**VanDyke:** Well, yes, there are special problems with identification. Love Marie Willis is a woman but Love H. Jameson is not. With a "Frances"

<sup>1</sup>Margaret Miller died unexpectedly in Elyria, Ohio, on July 7, 1994.

spelled with "e," not "i," or "Marian" spelled with "an" rather than "on," we have a fifty-fifty chance. But was Erie Wiggins a man or a woman? S. Partridge could be either Samuel or Sybil, as both wrote hymns. It has turned out that Georgie is Georgianna, Addie is Adolph, and Gipsy is Simon.

**THE HYMN:** I see here a stack of pages, single spaced, about two inches thick. This is your file of women authors. And is all this data on a computer file?

**VanDyke:** It's available on two floppy disks. It's the property of The Hymn Society, and I hope people can use it.

**THE HYMN:** This brings us to the question of how people find out about you and the DAH.

**VanDyke:** It's mostly by word of mouth. Queries that they can't tackle at The Hymn Society in Fort Worth get referred here. Libraries all around the country turn to the DAH to answer their hymn questions. Other organizations use us—Sonneck Society members, AGO [American Guild of Organists] members, historical societies, etc. But it's mostly by word of mouth. There are lots of people who phone or write because a Hymn Society member has told them, "I know just where you need to go to find an answer or that hymn."

**THE HYMN:** Tell me about Oberlin College and the contributions Oberlin has made to this project.

**VanDyke:** They have been very supportive. They grant me Library Associate status and give us this office with staff services and privileges. The college couldn't be more helpful; they're interested in the DAH and offer to help in many ways. It's great to have access to the mainframe computer. I've transferred the entire Bibliography of American Hymnals [BAH] from microfilm to computer, and I use it all the time. Recently a query came about Asa Hull, long associated with American hymnody. He is not in my author file, but now I can find him in the editor field of the BAH; so we can list the hymnals he compiled with dates and places of publication. Recently for a Hymn Society member writing a history of churches in Richmond, we could list all the hymnals that had been published in that city. So the once-buried data has become useful. We have to do this with the First-line Index now. It's absolutely necessary to do it.

**THE HYMN:** Are you also on salary?

**VanDyke:** No.

**THE HYMN:** You're a volunteer.

**VanDyke:** Yes.

**THE HYMN:** I need more help understanding what part of the project is on a computer and what part isn't.

**VanDyke:** On the computer, we now have a supplemental First-line Index. I didn't want to contaminate the original files with additions; so I've kept the new  
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*In the DAH office, Oberlin College Library. On the left, English language hymnals. In the center, boxes holding the original cards for the Bibliography of American Hymnals. Foreign language hymnals below the table at the center.*

data separate. It's a pilot project on our home computer to show ways this data can be useful. I'm not integrating Leonard's work and mine, and I have limited computer capacity. But I want to be able to say, "Look, when we put this data on the computer, just see what we can do with it."

**THE HYMN:** Are all the hymnals that Ellinwood and his helpers indexed included in the Bibliography of American Hymnals?

**VanDyke:** All of them, and that's about 4,800.

**THE HYMN:** Have you added more?

**VanDyke:** We have indexed 125 collections; thirty-three of them are in my computer as a pilot project. The others are typed, ready for inputting.

**THE HYMN:** It would be wonderful if we had topical references so that we could reach into the data and find all the temperance songs, for instance.

**VanDyke:** Actually we don't have topical fields, but tags could be added. It would add expense and time, though.

**THE HYMN:** Deciding which topical fields to assign to the indexed texts would often be very difficult.

**VanDyke:** Topics do change with each generation. You know what would be fascinating? I would love to do a study, or I wish someone would do this for a doctorate or a master's. Look at tables of contents, and see what happened. Early in the U.S. the church was the center of life. Tables of contents covered everything people did in their lives. But gradually some topics atrophied, and now when you look at a topical index, a lot of things people once sang about aren't there. When did people stop singing about death? Or the empty chair? Or crossing the river? And why?



Mary Louise VanDyke  
in her office, Oberlin  
College Library,  
Oberlin, Ohio.

**THE HYMN:** Death was a big topic in the nineteenth century and earlier.

**VanDyke:** Well, that's still the church's job, but now there's more emphasis on social action. Reading indexes in hymnals is a whole study in itself. It's a slice of American history.

**THE HYMN:** You are saying that the texts in these hymns are a sociological study, as well as theological.

**VanDyke:** They often reveal attitudes toward women, toward the poor, and so forth. And, you've got the social dimension with references to people needing help in the world. Then there are theological references in the ways the texts reflect attitudes toward God, to-

ward Christ, the second coming, etc. Hymns can reveal all this, though few people realize it. It's the best kept secret in the world. And it's also a literary history. Over the years meanings of words have changed. A change from "we" to "I" is more than a study in word usage. So the DAH can tell you a lot more than just the first line of a hymn.

**THE HYMN:** For example?

**VanDyke:** Take Psalm 19. Compare the fractured English of the old metrical renditions with Watts and Wesley, with Addison's elegant "The spacious firmament on high" and Dudley-Smith's "The stars declare his glory." What a variety of styles and interpretations of the same text!

**THE HYMN:** Our goal must be to make the DAH more accessible, and the computer seems to be the key. But before we leave these queries, I want to ask about questions you hate to get, or dread to get.

**VanDyke:** Answering queries is my favorite part of this job, but when someone asks me, "How many hymns have been written in the English language?" there's just no way to answer the question. Does he or she mean published hymns? There are a lot of local churches that put out their own hymnals, too. It's impossible to count those. There's no way to count all of the supplements that have come out, or trial things. Then there's the oral tradition, like the spirituals that were passed on from generation to generation. So there's no way I can answer that question.

**THE HYMN:** You mentioned Oberlin's support and contribution. Do you expect this support to continue indefinitely?

**VanDyke:** Oberlin knows that people around the world value the DAH and its services. And they feel it's good for Oberlin, for it pulls together several strands of Oberlin's history—temperance, abolition, music, etc. But other projects need library space too.

**THE HYMN:** Do you have an assistant who is being trained to take over when you retire?

**VanDyke:** No. I wish I did. I can't think of anybody in the wings at all.

**THE HYMN:** We need to find someone who can begin to learn.

**VanDyke:** Well, you see, that may be when the DAH moves. I mean, if we find someone in another institution somewhere, then this whole thing will have to move to that person's institution.

**THE HYMN:** But offhand, do you know of any other library that would be willing to take over from Oberlin?

**VanDyke:** No. I think it's going to have to be the person, the way it was with me. Once there's the person, then the location will come.

**THE HYMN:** So another challenge for The Hymn Society is to look for someone who would be interested in learning from you with an eye toward succeeding you one day.

**VanDyke:** I think that's going to be very hard to do because, of course, it's all volunteer.

**THE HYMN:** Could you tell me about one of the interesting hymnals you have in the collection here?

**VanDyke:** There are many interesting ones. We have great examples of buckwheat or patent notes and other systems of notation; these make interesting displays. We have foreign language hymnals published in North America—Czech, Swedish, Dakota, Norwegian, etc. One of my favorites is this little Barlow book [*Psalms carefully suited to the Christian Worship in the United States of America being An Improvement of the old Versions of the Psalms of David*, N.Y., 1823]. I held this book up during a speech, citing it as a part of American history. The colonists were so anxious to purge Watts' Psalms of some of their British flavor that they commissioned Joel Barlow to Americanize Watts. He overdid it a bit; listen to how he turned Israel's fleeing enemies into the British navy in Psalm 21:4:

Thy mighty arm, eternal Power,  
Oppos'd their deadly aim,  
In mercy swept them from our shore,  
And spread their sails with shame.

Afterwards a woman from the audience came up and said, "I'm a descendant of that Joel Barlow. Would you like some materials from our family archives about him?" (Incidentally, the Connecticut Association didn't like what Barlow wrote, so they hired Timothy Dwight of Yale to "disinfect Barlow.") I think of this as a tiny book—two inches by three and a half inches—with a big story.

**THE HYMN:** What indexing has been done since you took over?

**VanDyke:** A few hymnals didn't get caught in the first sweep. A few are old hymnals that were given to us. Some of these come in with touching inscriptions or pressed flowers. One has "Can I see you after church?" scribbled in the margin, followed with a carefully written, "If my mother allows it." We've added a few earlier non-denominational books as well as older Nazarene, Baptist, Friends, Evangelical Covenant hymnals, among others. And we've tried to keep up with the flurry of denominational hymnals that have been published—Adventist, Baptist, Mormon, Methodist, Presbyterian, Mennonite, Church of God (Anderson, Indiana), Reformed, to name a few. We've added some gospel hymnals that are still popular enough to be remembered.

**THE HYMN:** You do include children's hymnals?

**VanDyke:** Oh, yes, definitely. We can learn a lot from going through children's hymnals. This is where we find what adults really want children to know and attitudes parents want the younger generation to have toward God and the world.

**THE HYMN:** You are able to pull so much together because you have so much in your mind. You have grasped all this. And it took time; it would take anybody time.

**VanDyke:** And desire. You've got to believe in it; otherwise when things get tough, you're just going to throw it away. But you keep saying, it is worth it; it is doing some good. This has to be kept alive because eventually it's got to be made available to other people. It's such a comment on American society and life.

**THE HYMN:** About how many hours have you put into the DAH project?

**VanDyke:** I haven't counted them. I'm here in the office five mornings a week, but I work a lot at home too. There's no way I can keep track of all those hours. And when you think of the times that I speak, and the time it takes, that's volunteer time, too, because I market the DAH or talk about what we're doing.

**THE HYMN:** Let's estimate the time you have put in. You work here five days a week, at least two hours a day.

**VanDyke:** At least two, usually three. I usually come in early. A minimum of ten hours a week. Then I guess we could count an average of an hour extra each day at home.



**THE HYMN:** That's at least three hours per day, fifteen hours per week. If you work fifty weeks a year, that's 750 hours per year.

**VanDyke:** That office time means literally here in the office. When I go over to the Conservatory, that's usually not on office time, but I have to run over there to get information. I find that putting information together and typing out letters is often harder than anything else. Sometimes I come back in the afternoons if something is really pressing, if someone is really pushing me.

**THE HYMN:** So we're estimating conservatively 750 hours a year, and it's been about ten years. That means you've given at least 7,500 hours. Now, besides your contribution and Oberlin's contributions, we should also mention what The Hymn Society has contributed.

**VanDyke:** The Society invested in a microfilm reader for the office here. Otherwise our expenses are supplies paid for out of a petty cash fund. Some money is used for long distance phone calls and extra postage.

**THE HYMN:** So it is mostly small things, although the microfilm reader is a significant item.

**VanDyke:** And I was grateful for that. It saves a lot of running back and forth to The First Church. University Editions, Inc., gave us the microfilm of the 1.5 million first-line cards. This microfilm is worth more than four thousand dollars.

**THE HYMN:** I feel that I'm going to have a lot of money questions because advancing this project comes down to money.

**VanDyke:** I worry about that. It's hard to estimate about how much it would cost to keep the DAH going if we didn't have Oberlin's support. I just can't imagine what we'd do.

**THE HYMN:** It would certainly cost far more than the \$500 allocated in the Hymn Society budget every year.

*Joel Barlow's Americanized edition of Watts (1823) in Mary Louise VanDyke's hands.*



*DAH Office in Mudd Library, Oberlin College. In the background, reference works used by the project coordinator.*

**VanDyke:** I don't know how to give you a reliable figure on how much it would cost to keep this office going because here we don't pay rent, we don't pay electricity, we don't pay maintenance.

**THE HYMN:** It would be as hard as putting a price on your work. If we had to hire someone and pay a salary and benefits, it would be a significant amount of money. This point brings us back to our worry about finding a successor.

**VanDyke:** You could find someone who would do it for pay.

**THE HYMN:** Yes, but where would we find the money? It gets to be a hard problem.

**VanDyke:** I sometimes suggest that people make a contribution to The Hymn Society if they're happy with what we did for them. I think that The Hymn Society gets some of those contributions that I don't see. Or I say, we ask no money, but we do ask that you acknowledge our Dictionary. I think that getting the word out is important, though it doesn't pay the bills.

**THE HYMN:** And to build for the future, we have to look for the funding.

**VanDyke:** I couldn't agree more.

**THE HYMN:** Is any other library or any other librarian doing work comparable to this?

**VanDyke:** You know, Nicholas Temperley has the Hymn Tune index, and we have worked together a few times to answer queries. I use most often the places where first lines were indexed—Pitts Theological Library at Emory University, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, and Wittenberg University.

**THE HYMN:** Your relationship with these libraries and the librarians amounts to an informal network.

**VanDyke:** It's an informal network, but it *is* a network—an important one. There are several public libraries around the country who call or fax us as soon as they have a patron with a hymn query. And I correspond via e-mail with others.

**THE HYMN:** Is there anything in particular you want readers of *THE HYMN* to know about the DAH and your work?

**VanDyke:** Please send us information. Send any news you read about a hymn writer, living or dead. Obituaries are especially helpful, as well as other newspaper clippings. Our information needs to be kept current. If Julian [*The Dictionary of Hymnology* by John Julian] is revised, we should be ready with reliable, up-to-date information for Oxford University Press about North American hymn writers.

**THE HYMN:** You've already mentioned that you receive hymnals from donors and publishers, and those are welcomed.

**VanDyke:** We're always eager to round out our reference collection with contributed hymnals. But before wasting postage, it's smart to send me a list. I'll be glad to let you know which we don't need and which we do.

**THE HYMN:** Are you still looking for more volunteers to help you with indexing?

**VanDyke:** Sure. Anyone who is interested can contact me. It's a matter of reading a page for everything that's on it and recording it. I can always use volunteers, especially if they have a way to record the data electronically and store it. I'm at a point where I've probably reached as much capacity as I can in my home computer, but that doesn't mean that we can't go on getting data on floppies, so let's encourage it.

**THE HYMN:** What else might volunteers do?

**VanDyke:** I wish we had more Hugh McKellars to consolidate, condense, and write succinct biographical entries from the material we've gathered. In our biographical files, we have all sorts of material. Someone needs to write these entries. There is a form that Ellinwood himself set up for writing them.

**THE HYMN:** Any other projects for volunteers?

**VanDyke:** I have envelopes full of detailed information regarding the contents of many hymnals. This information needs to be entered into the computer.

**THE HYMN:** On behalf of The Hymn Society, I want to thank you for the work you've done for the *Dictionary of American Hymnology*. Do you have any final thoughts to leave with our readers?

**VanDyke:** Thank you, Carol, for taking the time and energy to visit the office here. I've really enjoyed sharing some of my enthusiasm about this project with you. I'm delighted to keep the DAH going. It's a privilege to be part of this to be a representative for The Hymn Society, and to do my small bit to increase awareness of the role hymns play in America's life. I'll repeat what I have said to eight Hymn Society conferences: the DAH is everybody's project. Leonard Ellinwood delivered this baby at our doorstep, and it's ours to nurture and develop together. ■

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