

I WONDER IF

With a little bit of exploring in your church hymnal, you will discover that only once in a while is the author of the words and the composer of the tune one and the same person. "I Wonder If" is one of these "once in a while" hymns. Richard L. Fleming wrote both the text (words) and the hymntune. As a matter of fact, this was a "once in a long while" kind of experience for him. Usually, when he tries to write music for singing, he uses words someone else has written.

As is often the case, the words came first and the tune followed. "I Wonder If" began as a poem thought out during an all night drive from Texas to Iowa in 1973. Dr. Fleming was driving alone and did it partly just to stay awake on the road! The poem was first called "Dare I Believe?" and went like this:

(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
In this enormous universe With distances so great That one must speak of galaxies Beyond the Milky Way, Dare I believe there is a God Who holds me in his mind?	If God must keep the stars in course And make the planets turn, If he upholds the natural laws On which the worlds depend, Dare I believe that such a God Will notice when I fall?	If war and peace are on his mind And nations his concern, If presidents and governors Insist their prayers be heard, Dare I believe that God will stoop To hear my softer voice?	Believe I dare because of One Who knew this God so well. "God knows," he said, "when a sparrow falls. And hears the poor man's prayer." The mighty God of earth and skies Knows who I am, and cares!

Shortly afterward, Dr. Fleming set these words to music for his own children's choirs. Can you guess why this did not turn out to be a very good anthem? _____

If you think the words of "I Wonder If" are better, can you explain why? _____

When the Hymn Society of America and the Choristers Guild jointly sponsored a contest for new children's hymns in 1981, Dr. Fleming decided to rework the words of "Dare I Believe?" and the result was the words of "I Wonder If." Then came the challenge of forgetting how the old tune went and of writing a new one.

You will notice that the meter of "I Wonder If" (8.6.8.6.14) is a little unusual. First seven syllables, then six. Then eight syllables followed by six. And finally a long phrase of 14 syllables. Now that means taking a good breath and using it well! Good choristers like you will sing all 14 syllables on one breath! The final long musical phrase is, however, so arranged that if you must take a breath in the middle, there is a place to do it almost unnoticed. Can you find the spot? _____

(Naturally this is for the benefit of singers who can't remember to keep their ribs high and shoulders relaxed.)

The tune has some tricky intervals in the opening phrases. Can you find them? _____

Which place seems most difficult to you, the one with the words "this enormous" or the one with the words "thoughts must stretch to?" _____

The refrain-like ending of "I Wonder If" has two measures of 3/2 time instead of 2/2. Can you guess why? _____

Do you wonder if Dr. Fleming wanted to stretch out the word "wonder" on the highest note to help singers open their eyes, minds, and mouths? And do you suppose he wanted singers of the hymn to take more time on the word "time" in the second 3/2 measure? Sometimes music is simply more interesting when the number of pulses in the measures is varied. Bright choristers will have no problem in this hymntune if they remember that the half-note is the same in both 2/2 and 3/2.

Something to think about: Why do you suppose most hymns have words by one person and music by another? _____