



Photographs by Kyndell Harkness/Star Tribune

Singing in four-part harmony at times, a packed house at Central Lutheran Church in Minneapolis joined in song and enjoyed Garrison Keillor's Lake Wobegon humor at a hymn festival on Sunday. The hymn-sing began with "Praise to the Lord, the Almighty" and ended with "Now Thank We all Our God."

A prairie hymn companion

The host of Minnesota Public Radio's "A Prairie Home Companion" mixed the sacred with the humorous Sunday at an old-fashioned hymn sing at Central Lutheran Church. The mostly favorite Lutheran hymns were interspersed with Garrison Keillor's poetry reading and a monologue, and he kept his audience chuckling.

He introduced the second hymn, "Children of the Heavenly Father," saying the beautiful song "brings us to tears. We sing it early so as to give us time to recover." He noted one hymn from his childhood: "And for all of us who grew up in fundamentalist churches, we will now sing 'Blessed Assurance.'"

Looking as he almost always does, slightly ruffled with tousled hair, Keillor opened the festival by reading "A Blessing" by James Wright and a Shakespearean sonnet. Later, another poem brought a roar of laughter: "After

40 years of marriage, she tries a new recipe for hamburger hot dish," it began. He also read the 23rd Psalm as the Pilgrims would have in the 1600s.

During his Lake Wobegon monologue, he talked about growing up as a Sanctified Brethren and first walking into a Lutheran church at age 14. "We looked upon the Lutherans as a worldly tribe," noting that as a member of a strict fundamentalist sect, "we were not permitted to dance — or even walk in a rhythmic manner."

It was a talented congregation that sang the 11 hymns, which also included "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling," and "My Jesus, I Love Thee." When the program noted the stanzas were to be sung in harmony, audience members dutifully complied. A choir led the singing in the majestic sanctuary, and an organ, flute and brass accompanied.

—Pamela Huey



Keillor entertained by reading a series of poems in his calm baritone voice. He introduced one poem saying, "I hesitate to recite a poem in church that starts, 'You do not have to be good.'"