Meeting Mary Louise VanDyke (Kappa), it’s hard to imagine this vivacious woman with a ready smile sitting alone all day among stacks of old hymnals. But that’s what she does, and she loves it. Of course, she does more than stare at those books, and she’s not really alone, either. People contact her every day with questions like “What was Presbyterians in Pittsburgh singing a hundred years ago?” or “What year was Isaac Watts’s Hymns and Spiritual Songs first published?” (answer: 1707). As director of the American Hymnology Project, Mary Louise knows, or can find out, the answers to these and almost any other question about American hymns.

So Many Hymns, So Much History

The project, based at Oberlin College where Mary Louise is an affiliate scholar, was started fifty-two years ago by Leonard Ellinwood, acclaimed hymnologist and cataloger at the Library of Congress, as a project of the Hymn Society of America (now the Hymn Society of the U.S. and Canada). Its ambitious goal: to compile an index of every hymn published in America from 1640 to 1978. To do so, researchers combed through more than 5,000 hymnals at the Library of Congress, other institutions, and in private collections.

Mary Louise became the project’s director in 1984 and found that much had been accomplished. Soon after settling into a tiny office in Oberlin’s Mudd Library, she received a freight shipment of over 1.25 million file cards, each representing a single hymn. She also became custodian of the College’s collection of hymnals, recordings, bibliographies, and related dissertations. While not an archivist or librarian by training, over the years she organized these massive materials and obtained donations of more. The collection now is available to musicologists, church musicians, and anyone else with an interest in hymns.

With music education degrees from Oberlin Conservatory and Western Reserve University, Mary Louise taught piano and choral music primarily, in public schools, and for a time at Butler University’s Jordan School of Music where she joined Kappa. As a children’s church choir director, she became interested in church music and earned a music degree at Kent State University. There she did cataloging in the music library, which fueled her fascination with hymns. She says, “A hymn is not only a religious song, it’s a historical document and a social statement of its time. A hymnal’s index is a sociological record.”

Queries from All Over the World

A typical day finds Mary Louise fielding questions from around the globe. She says, “The range of people who consult this office is unique. I think, barely legible penciled notes on scraps of paper, highly formalized queries on business letterhead, email questions from Spain or Sweden or Latvia, questions from denominational headquarters, academic questions from professors, economists, authors, composers, librarians.” Her greatest satisfaction is “being resourceful in matching people with questions with other people who may have the answers” — that is, when she doesn’t have the answer herself.

When not answering hymn queries, Mary Louise might be writing, or planning a community sing. She is widely published as an essayist and historian on hymn-related topics and is in demand to write book prefaces. She indulges her love of choral music by producing the occasional “community sing,” a participatory overview of hymns sung over time in a particular locale. For each “sing” she conducts hymnological research, coordinates participating choirs, and does administrative tasks. Her reward is hearing live congregational singing of the historical hymns she curates.

And what of those 1.25 million file cards? Mary Louise farmed them out to Hymn Society volunteers for data entry to digital form. She also personally compiled a supplement covering hymns from 1978 on. The resulting searchable database became the basis of the Dictionary of North American Hymnology. Not an actual book, the Dictionary is expected to be available online within a year. Will Mary Louise VanDyke relax when that’s done? Don’t count on it — as long as there’s a hymn to be researched, she’ll be in that little office doing the work she loves.