

Hymns celebrated on Charles Wesley's 300th anniversary: Hark the Herald

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Hymn writer Charles Wesley, the younger and less celebrated of two brothers whose work led to the forming of the Methodist Church, is being honored at a London exhibition celebrating the 300th anniversary of his birth in December.

“Hark the Herald: The Life and Music of Charles Wesley,” is a special display in the permanent museum crypt of the church, known as Wesley’s Chapel, built in 1778 by his brother John.

The exhibition presents Charles’s work as evangelist, poet and musician. Running until December 24, it features letters, 18th-century hymnbooks and memorabilia drawn from his life, including his Oxford University days and his stay in the U.S. state of Georgia.

Wesley’s hymns, which became popular in many Protestant churches, include the much-sung “Hark, the Herald Angels Sing,” “Christ the Lord Is Risen Today” and “O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing.” He wrote more than 6,000 hymns.

The exhibition in Britain is part of a wider celebration that includes a touring theater production, an international conference at Liverpool Hope University and a “big sing” at the Methodist Central Hall adjacent to the British Parliament buildings.

Charles told friends that he felt that his brother John overruled him in important decisions. But as Heather Carson, the Museum of Methodism curator, told Ecumenical News International, the exhibition reveals that Charles was probably as responsible as John for the early development of what became the worldwide Methodist Church.

“It brings Charles out of John’s shadow and shows that he was much more than a hymn writer,” said Carson. “Charles was the emollient one in terms of rifts within the

movement, who stayed on the conservative side and remained within the spirit of Anglicanism. Without his calming influence it is possible that Methodism would have burnt itself out.”

John Wesley’s Georgian town house, next door to the chapel and the museum crypt, is also open to visitors. They can see his furniture, books and clothing and listen to an audio commentary giving the point of view of his housekeeper, Elizabeth Ritchie. The museum receives about 1,000 visitors each month, two-thirds of them from abroad, mainly from North America and Korea.

Back in July, about 130 people gathered in Washington, D.C., to mark the anniversary at the Sixth Historical Convocation of the United Methodist Church.

At Asbury United Methodist Church, as his fellow Methodists held their red hymnals and sang Wesley’s hymns, Londoner Jonathan Kerry kept his hands in his pockets while singing the prolific British writer’s words from memory.

“They’re like the family jewels, really, that we share,” he said of Wesley’s lyrics. Kerry, who directs worship and learning for Great Britain’s Methodist Church, tries to sing those lyrics without a hymnal “because that’s how I concentrate on the words and what they mean.”

Though the cleric-lyricist was born three centuries ago, the small U.S. gathering showed through songs and speeches that Wesley’s words have found a place in 21st-century music and society.

“Just about every Christian church sings some of the hymns that Charles Wesley wrote,” said Robert Williams, general secretary of the United Methodist Church’s General Commission on Archives and History.

At a concert July 20 in Washington, a choir and soloists rendered contemporary musical settings of Wesley’s hymns, such as “Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus” and “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling.”

In his lyrics, Wesley referenced all but four books of the Bible, said Eileen Guenther, associate professor of church music at Washington’s Wesley Theological Seminary. “His texts have to do with love and grace and social justice, which were central to the founding of Methodism and are still part of what Methodism is about today,” Guenther said.

Wesley scholars enjoy hearing his words on visits abroad. Karen Westerfield Tucker, professor of worship at Boston University School of Theology, recently returned from Hong Kong, where she watched primary and secondary Methodist school students compete in a contest by singing Wesley texts. “The kids had a blast,” she said. “And the kids knew what they were singing about.”

Likewise, Paul Chilcote, current president of the Charles Wesley Society, heard Wesley’s words in Africa, where the Duke Divinity School visiting professor spent five years. “The early Methodist people learned their theology by singing it,” said Chilcote. “And I think that the Wesleyan hymnody still plays an important role, not just for Methodism but for global Christianity in terms of communicating the essence of the Christian faith, which is God’s love for us.” -*Ecumenical News International, Religion News Service*