

“Music and Mission”

2007 Spiritual Growth Study Theme

John Wesley gave instructions on how to sing. Therein he directs, “Sing lustily and with good courage. Beware of singing as if you were half dead, or half asleep; but lift up your voice with strength.”

When we sing the songs of mission we can do no less. Joyce Sohl’s book on our theme, “Music and Mission” reminds us of the passion brought to mission work by our fore bearers and expressed in the hymns of then and now. Mission hymns bring out all of our feelings—sadness for the state of the world—conviction to follow Jesus as he ministered to the poor and sick—joy in experiencing the reconciliation and freedom of salvation from death—and so much more.

Women in mission have been singing the songs of mission for more than a century. We express our theology of mission through our prayers, our works and our songs. Our understanding of mission grew over the decades. Once we sang, “Soul’s in Heathen Darkness Lying” and thought in colonialist terms of “strange people” who needed to be “civilized” and brought beyond ignorance. There was limited experience with diverse cultures. In our own lack of knowledge, we did not know that Christianity had been in Africa far longer than the United States.

As we learned and grew, terms such as “heathen” faded, but learning about other cultures, religions, and countries is still imperative as we try to live and sing the Gospel in a world in which people of diverse religions live throughout the United States—and as globalization affects all of us in losses of industries and jobs, cheaper products produced by exploited international labor, and diminishing pay and benefits at home.

Our foremothers realized mission was not just overseas. Human need for hope, love and healing was everywhere. Women wrote songs against slavery, they wrote temperance hymns to resist the pattern of poverty and domestic abuse brought on by alcoholism. Fanny Crosby wrote the hymn, “Rescue the Perishing” as she worked with the poor of New York City in the late 1900’s. It became a great inspiration for “home” missions in this country. The women could see the poverty of former slaves and survivors of the wars against Native Americans. They witnessed the exploitation of immigrant girls and set their hearts, hands and voices to the task of embodying the love of Christ.

Today, the sounds of mission hymns take on the rhythms and languages of peoples around the world. The old hymns like, “Where Cross the Crowded Ways of Life” still cut to the quick as the old issues of poverty, race, and gender oppression remain with us after generations of mission efforts. And the new hymns like “Jesu, Jesu” take us deep into the service which Jesus modeled as he washed his disciples’ feet—even when life is most difficult.

God’s love is alive and singing in Africa, Latin America, Asia and North America—and all over the world. The United Methodist Women’s spiritual growth study on the theme, “Music and Mission,” will bring us to our feet to sing, “Here I Am Lord! Is it I, Lord? I have heard you calling in the night. I will go, Lord, if you lead me. I will hold your people in my heart.”

(“Here I Am, Lord!” ©DAN SCHUTTE, 1981, 1983)