

Daughters of Charles and Granddaughters of Susanna: Women Who Preach through Methodist Hymnody

Susanna Wesley's 350th birth anniversary in 2019 reinvigorated an appreciation of the female voice in proclaiming Methodist theology, says Bonni-Belle Pickard, a superintendent minister in the North Kent Circuit.

But what do those voices say that Susanna's sons hadn't said already?



Susanna's influence on her boys

Susanna Wesley (*image above*) was diligent in her observation and response to the public and political situations of her time and determined to make her voice heard. Her considerable influence on her children was a recurring theme of her 350th anniversary.

One suspects she wrote hymns herself, and there is evidence that at least one of her six daughters, Hetty, wrote hymns as well. Perhaps some of Susanna's hymns were destroyed in the great Epworth Rectory Fire from which five-year-old John was miraculously rescued. Whether Susanna wrote or published hymns herself, her influence on Charles' hymn-writing was significant.

With Charles as her youngest student, Susanna instilled standards of excellence in thought and expression which served him well as he went on to study the classics and theology at both Westminster and Oxford. As Charles's biographer Barrie Tbraham notes: "we should not underestimate the impact which the recitation of psalms in the Epworth rectory kitchen had upon the young Charles." ([Barrie W. Tbraham Brother Charles](#))

What Charles wrote about

While much of the theology in Charles' hymnody transcends time, some of his themes definitely reflect the concerns of early Methodism. The struggle between conflicting understandings of salvation was a key issue in the early Methodist societies: was the grace of God available for all people or for a chosen few?

With regard to the individual's spiritual development, Charles and John Wesley were both keenly interested in Christian Perfection, the transformation God works in an individual.

The bulk of the hymns by Charles Wesley that have made their way into *Singing the Faith* continue to reflect this interest in the individual's personal relationship with God, extolling God's divinity but emphasising personal spiritual growth. Over half of *Singing the Faith's* 79 Wesley hymns concern personal salvation.

Australian author, [Joanna Cruickshank](#), has written about a theology of suffering which emerges in Charles Wesley's hymnody, noting that Charles (*image below*) had encountered much grief in his own life, both physically and emotionally, losing several of his siblings and

offspring when they were young. He often struggled with what was known as a “melancholic temperament.”



Susanna, likewise, was well acquainted with grief. The periods of doubt and despair which Charles and John experienced in their relationships with God are well known. According to Cruickshank, Charles’ hymns revealed his exploration of the individual’s own responsibility for suffering (i.e. sin), Christ’s suffering on behalf of humanity, and, in the doctrine of Christian Perfection, the purification the believer experienced through suffering.

In eighteenth-century society, such theological wrestling would have been considered private matters. Indeed, eighteenth century Christians would have seen hymnals as collections of poetry primarily for private use.

The Wesleys’ own 1780 hymnal led to a more communal understanding of hymnody; as a hymnal, it was meant for both private *and* public worship, and congregational singing required an established and agreed text. This ‘public’ aspect of hymnody also meant that Charles contributed hymns about ‘Human Relationships’ and ‘Life and Unity in the Church,’ concerns which continue to feature prominently with today’s congregations.

What subjects do female writers address in *Singing the Faith*?

The names of over 90 women hymn writers are found in *Singing the Faith*, including translators of hymns written by non-English speaking males. With just over 400 hymnwriters cited in *Singing the Faith*, approximately 20 per cent are therefore female, with a significantly higher percentage represented amongst 20th and 21st century authors.

In comparing the hymns written by women of ‘mainline’ denominations with those of Charles Wesley, some interesting patterns arise. For instance, their voices are silent in the Christmas section apart from those selections written for children, and they contribute no new Easter hymns. There are no new hymns on ‘Sunday, the Lord’s Day’, or, for that matter, on ‘Scripture.’ They provide virtually nothing in some sections heavily populated by Charles Wesley such as ‘The Ministry of Jesus Christ,’ ‘Passion and Cross,’ ‘Jesus as Prophet, Priest and King,’ ‘Jesus Christ: Risen and Ascended,’ or ‘Jesus Christ the Saviour, Lord of all.’ Their voices are also missing from the sections perhaps most beloved by Charles Wesley: ‘Conversion and New Life’, ‘Our Journey with God’, ‘Growth in Holiness’, and ‘Commitment’. Are these omissions due to their lack of interest in these subjects or are these contemporary women assuming that everything of importance has already been said?

The issues which contemporary women do address are sometimes those which Charles seemingly ignored or were not considered important in his day, including Infant Baptism and Marriage. In some sections, the women tackle similar themes as Charles but from different perspectives. In the sections on the ‘Nature and Mystery of God: The Holy Trinity’ and ‘Praise and Thanksgiving’, Charles’ hymns most often focus on praise for God’s holiness while the contemporary females express praise for God as Creator. Near the end of *Singing the Faith*, women’s voices join those of contemporary men in singing of the ‘Wholeness of

Creation', a section devoid of Charles' verse.

Human suffering in hymnody

The sections in *Singing the Faith* where female voices are strongest and Charles' is more subdued are those on 'Human Life and Relationships', 'Conflict, suffering and Doubt', and in 'Reconciliation, Healing and Wholeness'. These themes of relationships, conflict, and reconciliation are often related to the overall topic of 'suffering'.



Charles' willingness to address personal suffering, albeit within the bounds of eighteenth-century sensibilities, perhaps provided early Methodists with 'permission' to wrestle with the same. Yet in two centuries that followed the Wesleys, much of the theological momentum to find meaning in suffering was swept away in British Methodism and British Christianity, replaced by a triumphalist theology in which Jesus' suffering upon the cross was the only subject for discussion.

Several contemporary female voices, along with males such as John Bell and Graham Maule of the Iona Community in *Singing the Faith*, have reclaimed an identification with the God who not only empowers through suffering but 'suffers with.'

For example, Jean Holloway is a bereavement counsellor who writes powerfully of human brokenness offered up to God in her gentle hymn, [Lord, we come to ask your healing](#) (StF 652). Mary Louise Bringle's hymn, [When memory fades and recognition falters](#) (StF 621) speaks honestly and directly of the challenges posed by dementia and the frailties of aging and the God whose "arms, unwearied, shall uphold us still."

Ruth Duck takes this intimate understanding of personal suffering further in her hymns about God-suffering-with: "[God, how can we forgive when bonds of love are torn?](#)... a priest who shares our human pain, Christ intercedes." (StF 613) In another contribution entitled [Sacred the body](#), Duck claims: "Love respects persons, bodies and boundaries. Love does not batter, neglect, or abuse." (StF 618) Here is a theology that dares to speak not only of suffering but abuse, a theology that also dares to hold the abuser responsible and capable of change. This is an honest probing perhaps several steps beyond what Charles imagined in his assertion that in our unity in Christ "we all...cordially agree" ([All praise to our redeeming Lord](#), StF 608).

These women join other contemporary hymnwriters in daring to address a very personal God with the deep concerns of their hearts; in doing so they provide words through which others might also better understand themselves and God. The women are able to use words which speak of doubt and terror and unrest because they are confident that they address a God who cares about personal well-being and social justice. Their Wesleyan commitment to 'moving on to perfection' is both personal and communal. In a deep sense, these women are continuing the Methodist tradition of preaching that sets deep theological concerns in language that stirs the soul. They are indeed the 'daughters' of Charles and granddaughters' of Susanna carrying on a long and proud tradition of Wesleyan hymnody.