

"There's a spirit in the air"

Brian Wren

Back in the late '60s, when I began serious hymn writing, our hymnal had several hymns about the Holy Spirit's (usually seven-fold) gifts to the believer, a smaller number suggesting that the Spirit might be doing something in the church, but almost none speaking of the Spirit's work in the world or in creation.

Hence, "There's a spirit in the air," first written for Whitsun (Pentecost) 1969, in the English church I served as minister. The time was ripe; all the churches felt a re-awakening sense of God's work in society, and needed to connect Sunday worship with Monday morning. Our work for world development through Oxfam and Christian Aid, and for the homeless through the equally forthright charity, Shelter, was the backdrop to the hymn.

Wanting a hymn which young and old could enjoy together, I opted for a refrain and tried for simple language.

For added interest, I used a double refrain, modeled on Isaac Watts, whose "Give to our God immortal praise" has alternating refrains, each crafted to complete its preceding lines: "Wonders of grace to God belong/repeat his mercies in your song," variously refers back to God's creative power, historic deeds, and work in Christ, while the alternate refrain affirms that God's mercies "ever shall endure" when suns, moons, lords, kings, and the world "are no more."

In "There's a spirit," the first refrain states that God's love has been revealed in Christ, leaving open how far others might also reveal it, yet affirming that "the love that Christ revealed" is at work in the whole world. The second refrain speaks of Emmanuel,

God with us ("has come to stay"), calling us to anticipate God's coming reality by "living tomorrow's life today."

The opening and closing stanzas speak of the Spirit's call first to all Christians and then all people. The stanzas with refrain number two give varied hints of the Spirit's work among us, while the middle stanzas with refrain number one touch on the Spirit's presence in the work of worship ("when believers break the bread"), the work of justice, and the work of love ("where the homeless find a home/a hungry child is fed/a stranger's not alone").

To broaden the hymn's uses, ask a youth or adult retreat or class what the above phrases call to mind for different people. A simple phrase like "when a hungry child is fed" will be found to evoke different ideas and experiences.

Or display stanza three, replacing its first two lines with spaces for their seven syllables, and inviting people to write new couplets which lead into "praise the love that Christ revealed, living, working in our world." The couplet can begin with "if," "as," "when," or "where." "When the lonely find a friend" would be logical, but "God, forgive our greed and wrong" would not.

Looking back, my attempt to move from an indefinable "something" felt by many to the Holy Spirit, known in Christ, by moving from lower case to upper case ("spirit" in number one to "Spirit" in number four, number six, and

There's a spirit in the air,
telling Christians everywhere:
"Praise the love that Christ revealed,
living, working in our world!"

Lose your shyness, find your tongue,
tell the world what God has done:
God in Christ has come to stay.
Live tomorrow's life today!

When believers break the bread,
when a hungry child is fed,
praise the love that Christ revealed,
living, working in our world.

Still the Spirit gives us light,
seeing wrong and setting right:
God in Christ has come to stay.
Live tomorrow's life today!

When a stranger's not alone,
where the homeless find a home,
praise the love that Christ revealed,
living, working, in our world.

May the Spirit fill our praise,
guide our thoughts and change our ways.
God in Christ has come to stay.
Live tomorrow's life today!

There's a Spirit in the air,
calling people everywhere:
Praise the love that Christ revealed,
Living, working, in our world.

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number seven) was a failure, because heard and sung speech can't rely on visual, typographical clues.

John W. Wilson's 1970 pairing of the text with his tune LAUDS is an inspired match, wisely followed by most hymnals. If your tune is ORIENTIS PARTIBUS, avoid singing it as slowly as you sing "The friendly beasts." Here as elsewhere, if you read the text, it will tell you how it wants to be sung, "Lose your shyness, find your tongue, tell the world what God has done" is neither a lullaby nor a dirge. Flute and drum go well with ORIENTIS PARTIBUS, which also sounds well unaccompanied.

Suggested tempi: LAUDS $\downarrow = 72$,
ORIENTIS PARTIBUS $\downarrow = 76$. ■

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