

A Charge to Keep/Amazing Grace

Anthony Leach, arr.
Stan Spottswood, ed.

Notes from the Arranger

A Charge to Keep I Have/ Amazing Grace

I was born in Washington, DC and grew up in the Black Baptist Church communities located across the city and Charles County, MD where my father pastored Oak Grove Baptist Church. During my early childhood, my mother served as pianist/choir director for a variety of ensembles at New Mount Olive Baptist, Greater Mount Zion Baptist and at Oak Grove. My father was a 'singing preacher' in that he often introduced or closed his sermons by singing songs from his experience that highlighted the message or theme of the day. It is within this context of participatory engagement with the congregation, preacher, deacons, missionaries and choirs that my point of reference regarding retentions from aspects of African culture, the period of slavery in America and the shift from an acappella tradition of congregational singing that has been replaced by traditional and contemporary styles of gospel music that is a creative fusion of melody, rhythm, pulse, harmony and accompaniment forces beyond the acoustic piano, various percussion instruments and Hammond Organ that has emerged over the past 90+ years.

My first encounter with 'A Charge To Keep I Have' occurred at a very early age when I noticed that a deacon was calling the congregation to order by proclaiming the text of this hymn and the congregational response was unlike anything I had ever heard. I was experiencing the 'lined hymn tradition' in real time that involves a leader who issues the 'call' and the congregation 'responds' with the text that was spoken. This back and forth interaction was often framed by emotional shouts and yells from within the congregation as older members got caught up within the energy, sound and cultural legacy of this music that had its origin within the aural/oral tradition of the Black churches in the southern region of the USA. In particular, the Volunteer Chorus at New Mount Olive Baptist performed during the 'devotional period' that preceded the formal worship service. The singers were older African Americans and were led by one of the Deacons of the church. No accompaniment from the piano or organ, no percussion just singing, moaning, rocking, swaying, clapping and shouts of "Thank You Jesus," "Praise the Lord," "You Brought Me From a Mighty Long Way" and other utterances that were exclaimed across the congregation who were on their collective feet. The harmonic sound was unlike anything my mother taught her choirs to perform because the harmonies were anchored by the range and rhythm of the melody that felt unpredictable yet familiar in a strange way. I have carried that affect all of my life and am still amazed when composers and choral arrangers find ways to capture aspects of that vocal improvisation within adaptations of hymns and spirituals from the Black church.

The melody that I have used for 'A Charge to Keep/Amazing Grace' has its origins within this context. I have adapted it for contemporary use and function within and beyond the Black church. The accompaniment while simple emphasizes the rhythmic pulse of the arrangement. I have purposefully not included choral parts because I want to encourage vocal spontaneity from choirs as well as audiences for whom the text may be familiar but the melody and mode accessible. As one generation of African Americans passes on and the culture bearers are no longer contributing their experience with this idiom of sacred music, it will be the task of persons like me who are able to retain many aspects from my background in the Black church and share that with future generations through print materials and recordings that will enable aspects of this cultural retention from Black culture to remain vital and vibrant for the future.

A Charge to Keep / Amazing Grace

Commissioned by The Bishop Nathan D. Baxter Chapter of the Union of Black Episcopalians of the Episcopal Diocese of Central Pennsylvania, Harrisburg, PA as a gift to The Presiding Bishop Michael Curry, during his visit to Saint James Episcopal Church, Lancaster, PA in June 2022

Anthony Leach

♩ = 70

Unison Congregation *mp* **A**

A charge to keep_ I_

Piano *mp* **A**

4

Voice

have._____ A God_ to glo - ri - fy._____ A ne - ver dy - ing

Pno.

8

Voice **B**

soul to save, And fit it for_ the_ sky._____ To serve_ the pre - sent_

Pno. **B**

12

Voice

day. My cal - ling to ful - fill; Oh may it all my

Pno.

16

Voice

pow'rs en - gage_ to do my Ma - sters will. A - ma - zing grace_ how

Pno.

20

Voice

sweet the sound, That saved a wretch like_ me. I once was lost_ but

Pno.

24

Voice

now I'm found was blind_ but now_ I_ see._____ Through

Pno.

27 **D**

Voice

ma - ny dan - gers_ toils and snares I_ have al - read - y_____

Pno.

D

30

Voice

come._____ Twas grace that brought me safe thus far and grace will lead_ me_

Pno.

34

Voice

home. When we've been there ten - thous - and years bright

Pno.

37

Voice

shin - ing as the sun. we've known less day to sing God's praise, then

Pno.

41

Voice

when we first be - gun. Hm Hm Hm

Pno.

E

45

Voice

Hm Hm Hm Hm Hm

Pno.

48

Voice

Hm Hm Hm Hm Hm

rit.

Pno.

rit.