

# History of Hymns: "I Have a Dream"

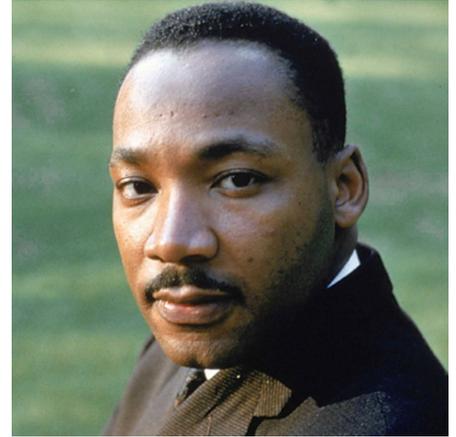
by [Rev. Jackson W. Henry](#)

"I Have a Dream"  
by Pamela J. Pettitt  
*The Faith We Sing* No. 3127

*Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.*

*...Don't let us rest until we see  
your love throughout humanity  
uniting us in peace.\**

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In a hymn that embodies the spirit of the "I Have a Dream" speech and the boldness of the Lord's Prayer, British minister and hymn writer Pamela Pettitt (1954?—2005) wrote a beautiful homage to the late Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. that urges us to continue the dream carried by Dr. King and so many others in the pursuit of justice and peace.

The Reverend Pamela J. Pettitt was a British Methodist minister who was a candidate for ministry from Palace Avenue Methodist Church in Paignton, Devon. She served in ministry in Truro and at Wimborne Methodist Church, where she later became Superintendent of the Wimborne Circuit. Her early days in ministry preparation were obviously a major influence of this hymn, considering she wrote it during her training. Pettitt later died in 2005 following an extended battle with cancer.

This hymn has been included in *Baptist Praise and Worship*, *Church Hymnary 4*—the hymnal of the Church of Scotland—and, later, *Worship & Song*. It was first sung in 1986 in a service that marked an ecumenical venture, Luther King House, which brought Baptist, Methodist, United Reformed Church, and Unitarian ministers together for training in Manchester, UK. The Reverend Graham Sparkes, President of Luther King House, remarks, "It was a bold, imaginative and pioneering venture at the time." The name "Luther King House" was chosen for a variety of reasons, including the following, as shared by Rev. Sparkes:

- The site occupied was originally the one owned by the Baptist college, and so to name the new building after a Baptist was appropriate.
- At the same time Martin Luther King is someone known and respected by Christians from many different traditions, and whose life and witness transcended denominational barriers, and this also made him an appropriate choice.
- Perhaps most significantly, Luther King House has a long tradition of commitment to justice issues—including involvement in issues of racism and discrimination. We are situated in a very diverse community, surrounded by people of many different faiths and cultures, and our student body is very diverse in all kinds of ways. Our courses for those preparing for ministry are in Contextual Theology, and so we take very seriously a commitment to relate our faith to the particular contexts in which we find ourselves—local, national and international. For us Martin Luther King stands as a wonderful example of someone who challenged the oppressive structures of his own society in the name of the gospel, who

- stood against the experiences of racism, violence and injustice, and whose faith offered a vision of a transformed world rooted in the teachings of Jesus.

The school always marks Martin Luther King Day in January, and they also offer a module on “Radical Believing” that prominently features the life and writings of Dr. King.

The text of this hymn seems to recall the anonymous quote, “No dream comes true until you wake up and go to work.” Drawing upon the natural rhythm of sleep (and, thus, the natural waking following sleep), the hymn creates an interesting dynamic pattern that resembles both sleep and recovery from a serious, life-changing struggle. The arc resembles the following pattern:

The first stanza begins with the inspiration and excitement around Dr. King’s “I Have a Dream” speech, offering words of unity and hope to people of all races and cultures. Rooted in the teachings of Jesus, his message transcended mere political banter. He not only spoke this message, he preached it with authority. Just as Dr. King’s life tragically ended, however, the dynamic of the hymn immediately descends into darkness when, as stated in the second stanza, “the dream can often fade” and “reality seems dark as night.” Out of the depths of night, stanza three moves into times of “fierce persecution, war, and hate,” when we hear the call of God to make a change, with “standing for the right” as the only option to ascend toward the light “Christ sheds on humankind.” In a brilliant turn in the fourth stanza, the act of dreaming is suddenly not enough; only in acting upon dreams can humanity prove its faith. The last stanza is a plea to God to “help us to do your will,” which is revealed in acts of love and grace. The urgency is evident—“don’t let us rest”—and powerful as the ascent toward unity, peace, and the light of God continues.

In the introduction of, singing of, or reflection upon this hymn, it would be helpful for the gathered body to know about this arc so they can be effectively invited along the journey. Living as people moving toward the light of Christ is hopeful, but it is also very important to remember that we have spent and continue to spend many days walking in darkness. Dr. King, along with many others, helped shine a light upon injustice in the United States. But as it is evident in Rev. Pettitt’s hymn, his influence far exceeded the boundaries of one country. People around the world continue to be shaped by his words and his witness.

The work is not over. We must continue to move toward the light.

*I express sincere gratitude to Laurence Wareing ([singingthefaitplus.org.uk](http://singingthefaitplus.org.uk)) and Rev. Graham Sparkes ([lutherkinghouse.org.uk](http://lutherkinghouse.org.uk)) for their assistance with information about Rev. Pettitt and the Luther King House contained in this article. For more information about their ministries, visit their websites!*