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Dissent and Restoration in a Corner of London

A Personal View of the Remarkable
Religious History of the Parish of St. Luke's

Peter J. Vousden

I am an Englishman of forty-six years who was born under the covenant into a Latter-day Saint family. This is a comparatively unusual blessing in England. There are many men in their twenties who could claim such a blessing but fewer of my generation. As a child I observed my parents and was shaped by the power of their examples. My father was an enthusiastic and committed pioneering local leader, and my mother a quiet and gentle woman who lived more perfectly the Christian ethic than any other person I have personally known. As a teenager, I experimented with my faith and discovered the beauty of it for myself. I accepted the heritage of my faith and grew to feel that Joseph Smith was my prophet. When the time was right, I was happy to serve as a missionary and share my testimony in the England Manchester Mission among my own people. I felt excited to be treading in the footsteps of Heber C. Kimball who pioneered the work in the northwest of England starting in 1837. There was no other place in the world I would rather have served.

Years later, visiting the Salt Lake Temple for the first time, I just wanted to touch the stone walls, for I felt I was a part of it. I marvelled at the vision of Brigham Young in commissioning such a structure and felt that I, too, was a follower of Brother Brigham. More years passed and I had similar feelings when visiting Palmyra, Nauvoo, and Carthage. These were more than just interesting places; I felt a sense of propriety, an awareness that the history of the restoration of the gospel was my heritage. I was a part owner.

At the same time, as an Englishman, and more particularly as a Londoner, I have similar feelings for many of the institutions, buildings, and characters of my country's rich history. For example, I spent fifteen years



FIG. 1. St. Paul's Cathedral in London, England, wherein thousands gathered after the World Trade Center atrocity.

working in the shadow of St. Paul's Cathedral in London (fig. 1), and I think of St. Paul's as my cathedral. It is an inspirational building that I never tire of viewing. After September 11, 2001, I stood on the pavement outside my cathedral with thousands of my fellow Londoners, who could not fit inside, to pay my respects to those murdered in the World Trade Center atrocity. It was a deeply poignant moment in which thousands of my fellows were outwardly showing solidarity with their American counterparts while inwardly silently pleading for God's help.

On less dramatic days, I have sat quietly in the side chapel of my cathedral or in its garden to pray. Although I have never been a member of The Church of England, which technically owns the cathedrals of England, I consider these, too, as partly mine. They inspire me. They are part of my heritage. St. Paul's, Coventry, Norwich, Winchester, and the rest, they are

all partly mine. I think of the Englishmen who built them and those who have worshipped in them as my fellows.

Similarly, the characters of English religious development are my people. I speak not of archbishops and court chaplains who shaped policy and manipulated kings—I cannot identify with them. I speak of the remarkable men and women who were prepared to fly in the face of severe official disapproval to practice their religion as they saw fit—Men such as William Tyndale, John Bunyan, George Fox, John and Charles Wesley, and the enigmatic but compelling Oliver Cromwell. I cannot sing nor listen to a Charles Wesley or Isaac Watts hymn without thinking that it's a part of my heritage. I cannot read Bunyan without identifying myself with him as an Englishman and a Christian. I cannot consider Cromwell's remarkable life without respecting his personal religious conscience and his tolerance of free thinking in regard to matters of personal faith.

And so, in matters of faith and belief, I have two heritages in which I see no contradiction. My personal commitment is concentrated on The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. My conviction that Joseph Smith was a prophet is real and important to me, and I subscribe to the message of the restoration of the true gospel. At the same time, I find strength and inspiration from the free thinkers of English history who bravely and sometimes recklessly flew in the face of official persecution in order to maintain their theological integrity. Indeed, if I understand my history and faith correctly, it is the work of religious reformers that prepared the ground for Joseph Smith. It was English and European religious independence that drove early-seventeenth-century pilgrims across the Atlantic Ocean to the new world where liberty could develop for two hundred years and eventually produced the ground from which the boy prophet sprang.

It was the commotion of a religious revival that aroused the interest of young Joseph. He leaned towards Methodism before his remarkable First Vision changed his life forever. I see no contradiction in a German Latter-day Saint feeling connected to Luther, or a Czech to Hus, or a Swiss to Zwingli, and likewise I see no contradiction in my connection to English Nonconformists. In my mind's eye, I see seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Nonconformists as the question-posers and the agents of the Restoration as the deliverers of answers. The former were deeply sincere theological wrestlers seeking for truth, and the latter were humble testifiers of revealed knowledge.

There is a small part of London that is special to me because it is where the two strands of this heritage interweave. This place is the parish of St. Luke's in the borough of Shoreditch. This parish consists of a

few churches and burial grounds which have strong ties to George Fox, Oliver Cromwell, John Bunyan, John Wesley, Charles Wesley, Isaac Watts, Brigham Young, Wilford Woodruff, and Heber C. Kimball. Here are found some of the greatest religious thinkers and characters spanning a two-hundred-year period within an area of London covering no more than a square mile. This area of London I know and love, an area in which I have strolled, sat, prayed, and wondered. Although it is a mere parcel of the great city of London, its history has permeated my bones. The two currents of my religious heritage uniquely converge in this one localised spot on the northeastern edge of the city of London.

Over a fifteen-year period, I have walked the streets of St. Luke's parish, prayed in the churches of St. Giles Cripplegate and St. Botolph's-Without-Aldersgate, conversed with Anglican ministers, lingered in the burial grounds of Bunhill Row, and visited Wesley's chapel. I have retraced the steps of Brigham Young and his associates, located the street where they lived, the site of the pool where they baptized, and the site of their first successful meeting place in London—and all of these places are close enough to reach during a brisk lunchtime walk. With the testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith burning in my heart and my mind turned to the history of religious thought in London, I feel that I might be uniquely placed to uncover a golden fragment of historical interest. I am not the only Latter-day Saint elder employed in the old city of London; there are probably a couple dozen. Perhaps I am not the only one to have discovered the peculiar history of St. Luke's, but I would be surprised if another has lingered longer, pondered more, imagined those giants of the past preaching and teaching more often, and generally felt more energized about those streets and buildings than I have.

For the purposes of this essay, I begin my tour of St. Luke's in the most restful place, the ancient burial ground of Bunhill Fields (fig. 2). Situated between Bunhill Row and City Road, the ground is a four-acre oasis of tree-shaded calm amidst the bustle of the modern city. The London plane trees, planted in Victorian times, are statuesque and magnificent. These giant hybrid trees, known in America as sycamore or buttonwood, thrive in polluted air and so are perfect for the location. But beneath their fabulous limbs, in the cold London earth, rest the remains of human giants whose faith, intelligence, courage, and determination helped break the rock-hard theological soil into which the seeds of the Restoration would fall and grow.

Bunhill Fields, once a pit for the victims of plague, occupied an extensive area of the ancient manor of Finsbury and was never consecrated by a Church of England minister. To be buried in Bunhill Fields became

a badge of honour for the religious dissenters and Nonconformists of England. The site was the first freehold property owned by Quakers who possessed it from 1661 to 1855. George Fox, founder of the Quakers, is buried there. Quakers studiously avoid marking graves with any form of memorial, so the exact location of Fox's grave is unknown. George Fox is remembered as the Nonconformist *par excellence*. As my grandmother would have put it, he was at the front of the queue when stubbornness was handed out. He refused to bend his conviction and was imprisoned eight times on purely religious grounds. Fox summed up his objection to conformity in passionate prose:

The Papists, they cry conform. And the Turk, he cries conform. And did not the heathen emperors cry conform? And the Presbyterian, he cries conform. And the independents . . . so all these cry, conform. So every-



FIG. 2. Bunhill Fields. Buried here are some of the great religious thinkers and Nonconformists of England: George Fox, John Bunyan, Isaac Watts, William Blake, and Susanna Wesley, mother of John and Charles Wesley.

one that gets the uppermost, and gets the staff of authority commands people. . . . But no law of Jesus requires it, who said "freely you have received, freely give."¹

John Bunyan (1628–88), itinerant preacher and writer whose *Pilgrim's Progress* stands as one of the greats, not only of religious literature, but of all English literature, is buried in Bunhill Fields. His grave is marked by an impressive monument depicting the character Christian carrying his burden on the way to the Celestial City. *Pilgrim's Progress* is a classic that retains its vibrancy and passion three hundred years after it was written. President Ezra Taft Benson referred to it as "a great book."² It is saturated with unforgettable religious imagery such as Mr. Worldly Wiseman, Giant Despair, the Delectable Mountains, Vanity Fair, the Slough of Despond, Doubting Castle, the Plain of Ease and the Hill of Lucre, to mention a few. A work of vivid imagination and deep sincerity, *Pilgrim's Progress* is as useful to the Christian seeker in the first years of the twenty-first century as it was the last years of the seventeenth. I am sure Latter-day Saint readers would immediately identify with it. But there remains one major difference between the time it was published and now, and that is its original novelty. It was the first attempt, and quite a daring attempt, to portray religious themes in a fictional manner. Some scholars argue it was the first English novel.

In life, Bunyan, a self-taught man, refused to stop preaching and teaching in the open air and was twelve years in Bedford prison for refusing to bend. He remains an inspiration to me not only as a writer but as an ordinary working man who had the vision to educate himself and live and die true to his conscience. In all of his writings, not just the *Progress*, the reader feels the sincerity and intensity of the author as he attempts to explore his faith in the written word. There are passages raw with pain and struggle and others where hope and healing are palpable. Bunyan's works are full of passion and honesty and, to borrow a contemporary Quaker phrase, they speak to my condition.

Isaac Watts (1647–1748), Congregationalist preacher and hymn writer, was born into a family that was familiar with the price of religious independence—his father was in prison for dissenting when he was born. Watts stands as a giant of hymn writing and hymn singing and can claim to have revolutionized Christian worship, for it was traditional only to sing Psalms in church. Watts's hymns were loved by Nonconformists and loathed by the establishment, who viewed them as subversive. His hymns were taken up by common people, who often sang them accompanied by folk instruments. For the modern Christian, the notion that hymn singing is subversive seems ridiculous. But that was exactly how it was before

Watts. For modern renditions of folk hymns in the traditional style, the great English folk singer Maddy Prior and the Carnival Band have produced several albums, notably *Sing Lustily and with Good Courage*.³ These renditions convey not only the beauty and power of the Christian message but also the sincerity of common folks who indeed sang them lustily and with good courage in the face of official disdain.

Watts's hymns became popular in both England and America. Many of his hymns were featured in the first edition of the LDS hymnal and nine of his hymns remain in the current (1985) edition. Karen Lynn Davidson, a recognized hymn scholar, has called Watts "the single most important figure in the history of English hymnody."⁴ When Watts died, his body was laid in a grave in Bunhill Fields.

William Blake (1757–1827), poet, artist, and visionary whose anthem "Jerusalem!" momentarily poses the question loved by so many Englishmen—"And did those feet in ancient time, walk upon England's mountains green?"—is also buried in Bunhill Fields. So, too, are Susanna Wesley, mother of John and Charles, and Daniel Defoe, Nonconformist and author of *Robinson Crusoe*. Countless less gifted or less renowned individuals who lived and died with an independent religious conscience are buried in Bunhill Fields.⁵

For a long time the burial ground was left to nature and became overgrown. Only in Victorian times when the great reformer of social conscience, Lord Shaftesbury (1801–1885), raised some money was the value of the site remembered and restored. It was Shaftesbury who collected money to build a suitable memorial for John Bunyan, which remains to this day. Somehow the site survived the Second World War blitz, when most of the streets surrounding it were demolished by the Luftwaffe (German air force). There is nowhere quite like Bunhill Fields in all of London. For any person with an interest in religious freedom it is an inspirational place. To me it is hallowed ground.

Right across the road from the front entrance to Bunhill Fields on City Road stands Wesley's chapel (fig. 3), a monument of legacy to John Wesley, founder of Methodism. Not far from the chapel are the two separate places John Wesley and his brother Charles received their deeply spiritual experiences calling them to minister. The conversion of John is well documented and forms part of Methodist lore. There is a bronze monument on the High Walk in Aldersgate Street, right outside the Museum of London, commemorating the day of May 24, 1738, when John declared, "I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt that I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for my salvation, and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death."



FIG. 3. Wesley's chapel. The monument in the foreground commemorates the conversion of John Wesley, who went on to establish Methodism. Reproduced with the permission of The Trustees of Wesley's Chapel, City Road, London.

John's "strangely warmed heart" proved to generate a phenomenal heat that sustained a most remarkable life of service and teaching. The Wesleys were ordained Church of England priests and never left the church. It was not their intention to start a new church; rather they just wanted to apply their beliefs and, in a methodical way, serve as they felt Christ would serve. John was warned by his superiors in the Church of England that to pretend to gifts of the spirit was a "horrible thing" and that he should confine himself to his own parish. But John would have none of it and declared, "The world is my parish." True to his word, he preached in all parts of England, taking the message to the poor coal miners of Northumberland and Wales, visiting prisoners condemned to die, and ministering to the people whom the Church of England bishops regarded as unworthy of their attention. Even today the coal mining areas of South Wales remain strongholds of Methodism. In the common parlance, people were either "Chapel" (Methodist) or "Church" (Church of England), and South Wales was and still remains "Chapel."

John Wesley travelled far and wide, but his conversion was on the same streets of London that Brigham Young, Heber C. Kimball, and Wilford Woodruff would tread one hundred years later. There is a fine Georgian church nearby called St. Botolph's in Aldersgate Street, London EC1, which commemorates the Wesley conversions (fig. 4) and boasts a unique stained glass window depicting John Wesley preaching in the open air in Moorfields.

Charles Wesley, the poet of Methodism, also received his call to serve while staying in the same area of London. His conversion preceded his brother's by three days, taking place on May 21, 1738. He was staying with some Moravian friends (disciples of the reformer John Hus) in a house in Little Britain. He was recovering from a period of illness when he felt not only the administration of his fellows but of Christ himself. Charles Wesley became a prolific and brilliant writer of hymns, six of which are in the 1985 LDS hymnal.

Another history-shaper associated with the area is Oliver Cromwell (1599–1658), who polarizes opinion as few other characters in English history. Farmer, soldier, Parliamentarian, puritan, regicide, and the major force during a period of immense upheaval, Cromwell remains an enigma. On the one hand he was a man of religious tolerance who allowed all sorts of Christian sects into his army and who ended three hundred years of Jewish exile from England, and on the other hand he is remembered with horror in Ireland as a merciless enemy of Irish Catholicism. Cromwell was a man driven by his religious conviction. It was his liberal attitude toward religious belief that encouraged the flowering of dissent, and it was the attempt by the advisors of the restored Charles II to reestablish the Church of England by force of law that put so many dissenters in prison after Cromwell's demise. Cromwell is connected to St. Luke's in that he was married in the church of St. Giles Cripplegate to Elizabeth Bourchier in August 1620.

John Milton (1608–74) also worshipped in St. Giles Cripplegate and lived in rooms in Aldersgate. Milton, one of the great English poets, was a prolific pamphleteer for republicanism and was a tireless supporter of Cromwell. Upon the restoration of King Charles II, Milton went into hiding, and many of his books and pamphlets were burned in the streets. However, in time even he was embraced by a general amnesty. He came out of hiding and resumed a normal life. Milton's epic poems *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained* deal with the eternal relationships between God, man, and our common adversary.

Another aspect of the unique religious history of St. Luke's was the establishment of the French Hospital in Bath Street. The hospital was

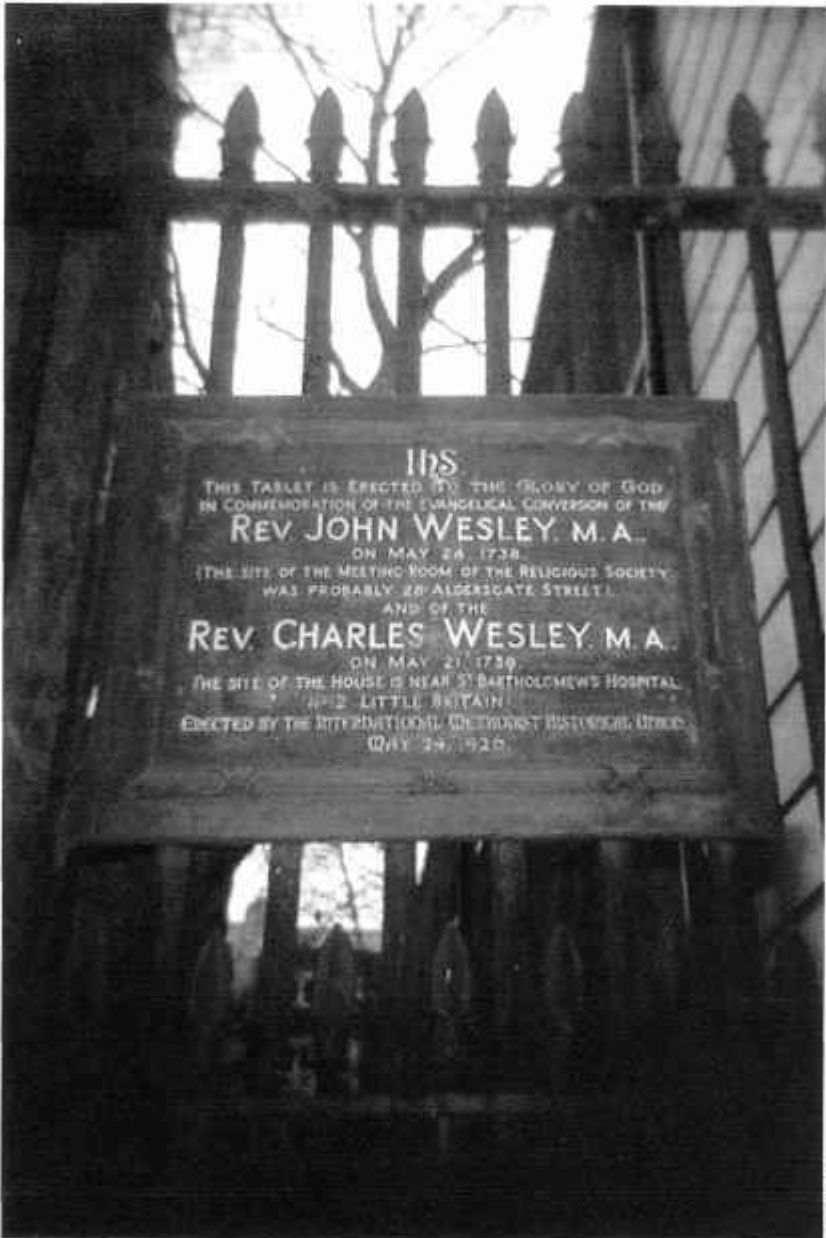


FIG. 4. Sign at St. Botolph's, commemorating the Wesley conversions. Charles Wesley is known as the poet of Methodism, and six of his hymns are in the current LDS hymnal.

provided by a wealthy Huguenot for poor French Protestants and their descendants residing in Great Britain. Following the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, many French Protestants fled persecution and sought refuge in London. The hospital was built as a place of healing for those Frenchmen who fled their own land to avoid persecution.

On August 18, 1840, George A. Smith, Heber C. Kimball, and Wilford Woodruff arrived in London with designs to convert the inhabitants of the world's greatest city to the message of the restoration of the true gospel. They were enthusiastic and emboldened by their recent and significant successes in other parts of Britain. The recently arrived missionaries followed the pattern the missionaries established when they first trod on British shores in 1837. That pattern was to gravitate towards relatives of established church members. In 1837 the Lancashire missionaries first looked up the family of Joseph Fielding, and when in Liverpool they called on the Cannon family who were related to John Taylor by marriage. At London in 1840 the same practice was adopted, and the missionaries went south of the River Thames to Borough, where relatives of Theodore Turley lived. They found little success and their fortunes did not change until they went to St. Luke's in Shoreditch.

Those same streets trodden by Cromwell, Milton, and John and Charles Wesley were to be walked by some of the greatest of all Latter-day Saint missionaries. Brigham Young, who joined his brethren Heber C. Kimball and Wilford Woodruff in London on December 1, 1840, would pass on a daily basis the burial ground where the remains of great ones such as George Fox, John Bunyan, Isaac Watts, and others silently slept. Brigham Young grew into an inspirational prophet-leader who commands respect from all Latter-day Saints, but in England Heber C. Kimball and Wilford Woodruff are special. To English members they remain the greatest of all missionaries ever to have preached the gospel in our land. Yes, they are my missionaries. Before I am accused of hyperbole, let me add a note of justification. Heber C. Kimball was the first mission president in the British Isles, and in the first nine months thousands were baptized, with most of the converts coming in Lancashire County, where Heber labored. Wilford Woodruff would later baptize 599 people in a few days in Herefordshire. These records are hardly likely to be surpassed.

So imagine my excitement at discovering that my missionaries had stumbled into my special area of St. Luke's. Did I say stumble? Well, I think

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they were led, but they remained oblivious to the significance of the area. They arrived in the area after being moved along by a constable who did not want them preaching in Smithfield Market. However, one man who did want to hear them preach was Henry Connor, a watchmaker who lived in Ironmonger Row, St. Luke's. Mr. Connor took the elders to Tabernacle Square, where a crowd of four hundred were listening to preachers. Henry Connor became the first London convert, baptized in the famous public bathing pool named Peerless Pool, located in St. Luke's.

The missionaries moved into lodgings on the same street as Brother Connor. He lived at 56 Ironmonger Row and they at number 40. Today Ironmonger Row is a mixture of offices and public swimming baths. These baths have been there a long time but were not there when Brigham Young, Heber C. Kimball, and Wilford Woodruff lived there. Sadly, no buildings of 1840s vintage remain, but on the site where the missionaries lived, two-bedroom apartments in a converted warehouse are selling for close to half a million pounds each.

So the proclaimers of the restored gospel lived and baptized in the parish of St. Luke's, and they also established the first successful congregations there, first in Pump Court and more successfully in J. Barratts Academy, Kings Square, Goswell Road. Kings Square (fig. 5) is just a few minutes' stroll from Ironmonger Row. It was at Barratts Academy that Brigham Young preached his first sermon in London on December 1, 1840. One week after this sermon the missionaries baptized their landlord's family. The first conference of the London Saints was held at Barratts Academy on February 14, 1841.

Brigham Young kept Joseph Smith informed of the progress of the British mission by letter. His letters included notes on seeing the sites of London. For example, this is an extract written December 5, 1840:

No 40 Ironmonger Row, St. Lukes

Dear Brethren, I have just returned from a walk with brothers Kimball and Woodruff. We have only been as far as St. Pauls and returned by Smithfield Market, about three miles.⁶

Such a walk would have taken the missionaries past the overgrown Bunhill Fields cemetery where the great Nonconformists were buried, the places where the Wesley brothers were converted, and the church where Cromwell was married.

In other letters Brigham informed Joseph of seeing the Houses of Parliament, the Queen's Royal Horse Guard, and other sites of historical interest. It seems inconceivable to me that had he known of the history of the parish in which he sojourned, Brigham Young would not have



FIG. 5. King's Square. Brigham Young preached his first London sermon in this area.

mentioned it. I am convinced that he and Elders Kimball and Woodruff were unwittingly adding to the remarkable religious history of St. Luke's.

Of course, in 1840 London was the biggest city in the world and had been populated since Roman times. One might make an interesting historical case in any of its parishes, but the fact remains that Fox, Bunyan, Watts, and colleagues were all buried in one place. John and Charles Wesley preached all over England but they stated that their conversions occurred in one specific place. The French Protestant hospital started in St. Luke's and nowhere else. Cromwell was married in St. Giles Church within the parish and not one of the dozens of other churches the city had to offer. Brigham Young, Wilford Woodruff, and Heber C. Kimball might have found success in any other part of London, but the fact remains that they did not. They found success and started establishing the Church in St. Luke's, an uncommonly fertile field of spirituality.

I am really not in a position to make a cast-iron historical case arguing that the history of St. Luke's demonstrates a spiritual continuity, or that there was a pattern of religious phenomena culminating in the presence of three of the greatest Latter-day Saint missionaries in 1840. That doesn't matter very much to me because I remain convinced that the religious history of St. Luke's is no coincidence. I find it remarkable that the latter-day work flourished in this small parish soaked in religious history. I feel

that the God of Watts, Bunyan, Fox, and Wesley is the God of Brigham, Wilford, and Heber and that God himself took the latter-day missionaries into St. Luke's for his own purposes.

Today, St. Luke's is not the most glamorous part of London, nor the prettiest. In fact, to the uninitiated it might seem worthy of no merit at all. But to me its streets resonate with the voices of Fox and Kimball, Wesley and Woodruff, Bunyan and Smith, Cromwell and Young. What a cacophony I hear as my mind plays out open religious meetings featuring these passionate and eloquent men. I wonder what the Nonconformists would have made of the testimonies of the Latter-day Saint elders—those great swimmers against the stream, those dissenters whose sincere, intellectual, and spiritual energy would put many modern Latter-day Saints to shame—what would they have made of the simple and straightforward testimony that God the Father and our Lord and Savior had appeared to a boy prophet? Of course, there are no answers to be had to such questions, but that in no way diminishes the fun of posing them. I remain grateful for my parish of St. Luke's and the wonderful men associated with it.

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1. Cecil W. Sharman, *George Fox and the Quakers* (London: Quaker Home Service, 1991), 240.

2. Ezra Taft Benson, "Do Not Despair," *Ensign* 4 (November 1974): 65.

3. Maddy Prior with The Carnival Band, *Sing Lustily & with Good Courage: Gallery Hymns of the 18th and Early 19th Centuries*, Saydisc & Valley Recordings, CD-SDL 383 (CD, UK, 1990).

4. Karen Lynn Davidson, *Our Latter-day Hymns: The Stories and the Messages* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988), 455.

5. Others buried at Bunhill Fields include: Thomas Bayes, Presbyterian minister, philosopher, and statistician whose theorem (Bayes Theorem) is still used in learned papers; Thomas Fowell Buxton, prison reformer; several descendants of Oliver Cromwell; Lt. General Charles Fleetwood, parliamentary army officer during the English civil war; John Owen, Vice Chancellor of Oxford University, a brilliant theologian who was a personal minister to Oliver Cromwell and still allowed to preach by the restored Charles II; and Richard Price, collaborator with Thomas Bayes and defender of the American colonists and the French Revolution. The *Official Guide to Bunhill Fields* published by the Corporation of London estimate 123,000 interments took place in the burial ground over a 200 year period.

6. Joseph Smith Jr., *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed., rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971), 4:237.