

“Coming to Know Christ Personally through Gospel Music”

Debra and Harry Bonner

Parents of the Bonner Family

Debra Bonner: As a child, my mother taught me to befriend the friendless and to help others. So if I saw someone being bullied, I would jump in to defend them. I was fighting almost every day. One day, I defended Linda Gayle Watson, who was new in school. She was sweet and kind. She said she wouldn't fight back because of her friend Jesus. I wanted to be just like her

Linda Gayle invited me to her church, Foss Avenue Baptist Church, where she sang in the youth choir. She had the most beautiful voice I'd ever heard. I promised the Lord that if He would just give me a voice, I would never fight again. I kept my promise, and He kept His. I came to know Jesus Christ personally through gospel music. Gospel music is personal. It gives me joy and peace. It speaks of Christ's love for me, how He suffered for me, how He comforts me, and how He helps and guides me.

Foss Avenue Baptist Church loved and nurtured me and paid for me to take voice lessons. I had a learning disability as a child. At 12 years old, I still couldn't read. Through the Spirit I learned to read by singing from the hymnal. The Spirit opened my mind, and I began to understand my teachers at school. I graduated from high school with honors and traveled throughout Europe as a soloist with a 100-voice choir and orchestra.

I met Harry when we were getting our higher education. Then he asked me to marry him. I thought, “You must be out of your mind!” Then the Spirit spoke to me and said, “You told me to choose your mate.” So I said, “Ok, Harry, let's pray about it.” After the prayer, the Spirit spoke to me and said, “This gift I give you for eternity.”

My life was totally transformed through Christ.

Harry Bonner: Four months after Debra and I married, we served a mission for the Missionary Baptist Church in Liberia, West Africa. We lived in mud huts, bathed in the creek, and slept on thatched beds. The people were wonderful.

Debra: We taught about the gospel of Jesus Christ, and they taught us how to live it. When the Lord told me to resign and return to the United States then go west, it was hard. But we know the Lord, and if the Lord says “Go,” we're out of here. We're gone!

Harry and I had \$100 to our name. We had a one-year-old, a three-year-old, and I was seven months pregnant. We stopped in Las Vegas to look for work, moving from a hotel to a shelter as our funds depleted.

Our pockets were empty, and I was empty. I still had faith that, somehow, it would work out; I just didn't know how.

Harry: When I was looking for a job, I met two young men with white shirts and ties, who introduced me to a Brother Carl Ross, who introduced me to the employment services for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I was deeply touched by their kindness, and the Ross family invited us to stay with them until we could get on our feet again. Brother Ross's attitude and spirit reminded us of the villagers in Liberia, so Christlike. We came to love him and his wife like they were our second parents.

Debra: The Rosses invited us to attend church with them. Our first impression was, honestly, difficult. No one greeted us. The music was not the gospel music I knew and loved.

One Sunday, a missionary named Elder Tukia came to me. He was so excited, and I was excited too. I thought, "Maybe he could tell me something that would change my mind about being a member of this church." He said he would come visit that week, but he never did.

Harry: After several months of staying with the Rosses, I finally received news that I had landed a job. The day after Debra gave birth to our third child, I got paid and we moved into a condo. Even though we moved quite a distance away, we continued to attend the Rosses' ward.

Debra: One Monday, I got a knock on the door. It was Elder Tukia and his mission companion, Elder Kotterel. When I answered, Elder Tukia bowed his head, seeming to pray for a moment, before coming back up with a big smile on his face.

Harry: When the missionaries came to dinner, I said to Elder Tukia, "You were going to come see us before, but you never came. So why are you here now?"

Debra: Elder Tukia said that he saw me in his dream the night before and that he was supposed to find me and baptize me and my family." He told us that he had been knocking on random doors; that's why he was so happy and prayed in thanks when I answered the door. It turned out that he had miraculously been transferred to our new area.

Harry: We were very hesitant to attend church again, but Elder Tukia invited us to attend the new ward in our area, just once. We reluctantly agreed, not realizing one time is all it would take.

As soon as I walked in the door of that church building, I immediately felt the tangible presence of the Holy Spirit and thought, "Oh, no!" because I didn't want to join this church.

Debra: And when I walked in, it was like everything was in slow motion; everybody was smiling, their arms outstretched to shake our hands. It was a glorious day.

Harry: Afterward, we were hesitant to tell each other what we'd individually experienced. But then the missionaries came, and we began to express what we had felt. They invited us to be baptized the next Saturday. When we said no, Elder Tukia asked if we would pray about it.

Debra: Well, we prayed, and the Spirit said to me, "Be baptized in this church at this time." So we were baptized that Saturday.

When I went under the waters of baptism and came up, everybody in the room had a glow. I knew that everything that I had been taught to that point was true.

Because of my culture and my personal experiences, I still had some questions about the Church. Some things were difficult to understand. But through study and prayer, the Lord has said He would make it clear to me and that I would understand it fully in His time. Time passed. He kept His word, and now everything is clear to me.

So began our sojourn with the fulness of the gospel. Our walk being in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints hasn't always been easy, but it's been glorious.

Our children can walk with confidence. They know who they are, and they know Whose they are. I've become a better person, a better mother, wife, sister, and friend. I finally got it. I've come to know that we are *all* God's children. We are sisters and brothers, regardless of race, creed, or culture.

Harry: Our family strives to embody the two great commandments of the Lord: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself."¹

As we've obeyed these commandments, we've had a life of joy, love, and success. Our eight children are happy, they love each other, and they love the Lord. They love their brothers and sisters all over the world. That is the fruit of this great gospel.

Debra: As a little girl, all I wanted was to sing and be a missionary like Linda Gayle Watson, and it's happening. Our family, the Bonner family, sings gospel music for the world.

I've been teaching voice for nearly 50 years, and I've formed gospel choirs with my students and children so they can come to know Christ personally and have the joy that I share with Him. The Spirit of the Lord I feel through gospel music has given me joy, hope, love, and progression.

¹ [Matthew 22:37-40](#)

We have been changed through Christ's amazing love and grace. We pray that you can come to know Him personally and feel His love for you too.

[DEBRA SINGS "AMAZING GRACE"]

Debra: BYU-Pathway students, our brothers and sisters all over the world, we testify that God knows you and loves you. He helped me read despite learning disabilities. Jesus helped me find my eternal companion. Today is our 47th wedding anniversary.

Harry: 47th baby!

Debra: And He also helped me discover the fulness of the gospel and to see my dreams for my family come true. I say this in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Harry: Amen.