

THE HYMN SOCIETY IN THE UNITED STATES AND CANADA

Melva W. Costen honored as Fellow by The Hymn Society

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Waterloo, Ontario. Melva W. Costen has been honored by The Hymn Society in the United States and Canada at its Annual Conference in Waterloo, Ontario, July 19, 2017, by being named a Fellow of The Hymn Society. This award, the highest honor given by the organization, was conferred because of Dr. Costen's work as a scholar, editor, and practitioner of church music with a particular emphasis on African-American congregational song.

Born in South Carolina, Melva W. Costen holds degrees from Johnson C. Smith University, Charlotte, North Carolina; University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; and Georgia State University, Atlanta. She is Helmar Emil Nielsen Professor Emeritus of Worship and Music at the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta, Georgia. She was also Visiting Professor of Liturgical Studies at the Institute of Sacred Music at Yale Divinity School. Dr. Costen is a lifelong Presbyterian, a musician, a former choir director and educator, a leader, and, as Samantha Piccolo, of the Presbyterian Historical Society termed her, "a source of inspiration and joy." Her life was shaped and inspired by her work with civil rights movement: she worked with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.; participated in lunch counter sit-ins, and worked to desegregate institutions across the south with her husband, the late Reverend Dr. James Costen. Her children also played important roles in the movement, including helping to integrate schools in Rocky Mount, N.C. Piccolo notes that Dr. Costen said one of their peak moments was the "day the court ruled in favor of Costen's son, Craig, being allowed to attend a whites-only school."¹

Dr. Costen is a renowned scholar of African American church music and worship. She published *African American Christian Worship* (1993, rev. 2007) and *In Spirit and in Truth: The Music of African American Worship* (2004). In her scholarship, she examines the variety of genres of music used in African American worship, in historical and current practices and in emerging trends. Her work documents the history and theology of the African American worship experience and studies the impact of media, technology and new musical styles, including global music, on African American churches. An advocate for vital and vibrant worship, her books also include orders of worship and suggestions for worship planners to listen "for the Holy Spirit as they prepare for worship," to quote the jacket of *In Spirit and in Truth*. She chaired the committee that produced the 1990 *Presbyterian Hymnal* for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and served on the Advisory Committee for the *African American Heritage Hymnal*.

Speaking of her friend and colleague, Cynthia Wilson said that Melva always reminded people "that we should never ignore where we're from, and always acknowledge that it serves to undergird where we are going." Wilson recalls that Costen constantly reminded her students that worship is a *lived* experience. "One of things she said to me at her retirement," remarked Wilson, "was 'finish the work!'"

Founded in 1922, The Hymn Society in the United States and Canada is an ecumenical organization of people who are passionate about hymns and congregational song. We recognize the importance of the people's song in worship and want to assure its vitality in the future. The Hymn Society community, open to all, is made up of scholars, church musicians, poets, composers, choir directors, choir members, clergy, worship planners, songleaders, music publishers, music educators, and people who love to sing. We believe that the holy act of singing together shapes faith, heals brokenness, transforms lives, and renews peace. Our mission, therefore, is to encourage, promote, and enliven congregational song.

For further information about The Hymn Society in the United States and Canada, contact Jan Kraybill, Executive Director, 7111 W 151st St, #374, Overland Park, KS 66223, or call 800-THE-HYMN. Please visit the website at www.thehymnsociety.org.

¹ Interview: "Melva Costen shares rich life, experiences in PHS Living History project" September 3, 2014, available online