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Annette John-Hall: Amen for racial harmony, mixed blessings

BYLINE: By Annette John-Hall; Inquirer Columnist

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Whether you're a person of faith or not, I'm sure you've heard the overused adage at one time or another: Sunday is the most segregated day of the week.

Well, not that I disagree, but so what.

After all, where you worship and with whom you worship isn't nearly as important as the way you live outside of your place of worship.

You know, it's the godly things - "Do unto others" . . . "In everything give thanks" . . . "Love one another" - that matter.

Spiritual substance trumps religious style every time.

Still, I know from experience that the best way to break down the barriers that continue to separate us is to engage each other in ways that may not come naturally.

Certainly, that's what the Chancel and Gospel choirs of the African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas and the Bucks County Choral Society did when they joined together for "Singing Our History," two concerts performed at Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church in Doylestown and at St. Thomas in Overbrook Farms over the weekend.

Two organizations with storied histories: The African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas was founded in 1792 by Absalom Jones to build religious freedom and self-determination for African Americans. The 100-voice-strong Bucks County Choral Society has been recognized for almost 40 years as the region's premier choral ensemble.

Yet both organizations couldn't wait to come together to help break down barriers - song by song.

It's called stepping out on faith.

Started by friendship The collaboration between the Choral Society and St. Thomas grew out of a friendship between Thomas Lloyd, the choral group's artistic director, and Jay Fluellen, who directs the St. Thomas Chancel Choir.

"It's been the case with predominantly white community choirs, who, from time to time, invite black choirs. The black choir provides a rousing finish to the concert, but neither of them spend much time together," Lloyd said. "Music is a great way to get to know each other. It provides a lubrication in a way that artistically engages people."

Admittedly, the repertoire was challenging. Some of the singers had never done jazz or gospel before; others had never performed classical arrangements specifically written for a choral ensemble.

Yet, Lloyd, Fluellen, and St. Thomas Gospel Choir director Waltier Blocker selected songs from all genres, knowing their singers would be up to the challenge - and they were.

Of course, it helped that DeVonne Gardner - the renowned Philadelphia soprano who toured with Duke Ellington's "Sacred Concerts" in the '60s and '70s and can sing everything from a jingle to a hymn - was a featured soloist.

Strong bond During the finale, you could see how the choirs were comfortably at home with each other after only two rehearsals together.

When Lloyd took his place to direct "Hallelujah" from Handel's Messiah, Blocker mockingly pushed the BCCS director out of the way and conducted the same number - only the soulful, Quincy Jones-arranged version.

"Tons of fun," said BCCS tenor Dave Doughty afterward. "To sing different types of music that was spontaneous - we just let it rip."

Singing together created "a warmth between the choirs," said Mercedes Sadler, a longtime member of St. Thomas' Chancel Choir. "I'm sure we're going to continue this."

Well, as they say in the black church, I don't know about you, but by the way the audience reacted soaking in selections by Copland, Haydn, and, yes, Edwin Hawkins, it looked like there was just as much fellowship going on in the pews as there was in the choir loft.

Every concertgoer, black and white, left St. Thomas' beautiful stained-glass and stone sanctuary with spirits renewed.

"I could feel the love," said Carolyn Crouch, 37, a Germantown resident, who is white.

"I very much liked the diversity," said Beth Minor, 27, Crouch's friend, who recently moved to Germantown from Devon. "It doesn't allow you to get stuck in your comfort zone."

"It changes your comfort zone," corrected Crouch.

"Yes," Minor agreed. "It changes your comfort zone."

Contact Annette John-Hall at 215-854-4986 or ajohnhall@phillynews.com. Read her work:

<http://go.philly.com/annette>