

A Joyful Noise Celebrates St. Bridget's 131st Anniversary



Just prior to the 3 p.m. Mass, Ted Koelick of St. Vincent's Parish hangs a banner as St. Bridget's gospel choir warms up for the service.

By Teresa A. Parsons
St. Bridget's parish community celebrated its 131st anniversary on Saturday, July 20, by sharing the gift of its cultural heritage with close to 100 music lovers from all areas of Rochester, hosting a gospel music workshop organized by the choir of St. Vincent DePaul Church in Churchville.

If the idea of an inner-city parish with a "predominately Afro-American expression" and "a white suburban parish" joining to sing and celebrate gospel music seems unlikely, it's no more unusual than the blend of cultures in which St. Bridget's has been rejoicing for the past week — Afro-American, Irish, German, Hispanic, Italian.

"Music transcends religion," said Linda Rosier, a member of St. Bridget's 16-member gospel choir, which sings regularly at many area churches, including St. Charles Borromeo and St. Louis in Pittsford, in a style they call "Batholic," recognizing its Catholic and Baptist/Pentecostal influences. Rosier, who also serves as a community outreach worker at St. Bridget's, believes the music appeals to people because "they like to be able to carry through what the spirit brings. We are a family here. They're after that family sense that comes out of our music."

The choir is directed by the Rev. Charles Buchanan, St. Bridget's minister of music, who felt the workshop signalled a step forward. "It's the first organized musical workshop in the three years I've been here," he noted. "I think maybe the music and the way the choir is holding together are beginning to create something."

More than 10 different congregations were represented at the workshop, from urban parishes like Corpus Christi and Immaculate Conception to St. Joseph's in Penfield and St. Theodore in Greece.

The day-long program included music sessions in the morning and afternoon in preparation for singing the Gospel Mass of St. Augustine, written by Leon Roberts, composer and music director for St. Augustine's Church in Washington, D.C., who directed the workshop. At 3:30 p.m., all work ended, and the Gospel Mass began with workshop participants forming a mighty choir, accompanied by a dozen instrumentalists who teach at area high schools and colleges, organized by Bill Halligan, a parishioner of St. Vincent DePaul, and retired music teacher.

Father Robert Werth, St. Bridget's associate pastor, called Saturday's liturgy

"awesome," observing that many of the participants at the Gospel Mass, himself included, were tearful at times. "I think it's because when you look around here, it hits you in the guts that it is possible to bring people together, that the power of the Holy Spirit can really do what we preach about — bring about the Kingdom of God," he explained. "We have here today a slice of heaven."

Helen Halligan, music director at St. Vincent DePaul, which also observed an anniversary this weekend — the 100th of their church building — said she organized the workshop around Roberts, whom she heard about at a Buffalo workshop. After listening to a tape of the Mass he wrote, she immediately called him and asked if he would come to Rochester. She identified St. Bridget's as one of three possible sites, and parishioners there were enthusiastic about incorporating the workshop into their 131st anniversary celebration.

One lesson gleaned from simply watching Saturday's workshop was that praising the Lord is work. "You look around at a Baptist or Pentecostal service and see people sweating — physically exhausted — at the end of a service. But it's only physical exhaustion," Father Werth pointed out.

"You experience the beauty of this culture and ask 'where does racism develop from?'" he added.

St. Bridget's anniversary celebration was kicked off last Friday with a Mass celebrated in Spanish by Father Laurence Tracy, marked by "a real sense of coming home," according to Father Werth.

Sunday's celebration of all heritages featured the homecoming of Father Jerome Robinson, founder and former executive director of the diocesan Office of Black Ministries, now living in Chicago. Father Robinson was the homilist and celebrated a Gospel Mass along with Fathers Werth and William Leone, pastor of Holy Redeemer/St. Francis Xavier, with spirited music by St. Bridget's choir.

St. Bridget's continued their celebrations on Monday and Tuesday, July 22 and 23. Irish, German and Italian heritages of the parish, observed on Monday, were honored by a Mass with the Il Coro Italiano Padre Beatini choir, and the homecoming of former St. Bridget's pastor, Father Francis Vogt, as well as members of St. Bridget's School Class of 1935 for their 50th Anniversary. Closing five days of rejoicing, on



During the service that immediately followed the workshop on Saturday, a 12-piece ensemble complemented the many voices praising the Lord.



Kizzie Evans holds her grandson Kevin Thomas Evans, age 20 months, at the end of the service.



Robert Rosier gently lifts the bells in preparation for the Consecration of the Eucharist.



Robert Rosier of St. Bridget's Parish led the procession that swayed to the music of the whole congregation.