



Gospel Voices sopranos, from left, Detries Freeman, Sandra Pekins and Terrie Dee Ray



Billie Jeanne Robinson

Gospel Voices of Faith

Celestial singing at Athens' Mt. Zion Baptist Church

*I'm yours, Lord. Everything I've got,
everything I'm not.
I'm yours, Lord. Try me and see, see if I can be
completely Yours.
He's done something good for me. Give Him
praise, for He's done something good for me.*

A tide of music rushes over and around you, bringing with it a strong undertow of bass voices, a wave of sopranos, a spray of piano and tambourine and leaving in its wake a deep, deep joy. When you finally get up out of the pew you realize you have been in church for three hours.

This is what it is like to spend Sunday morning in Mt. Zion Baptist Church, home of the Gospel Voices of Faith.

For 13 years, Ohio University's Gospel Voices have been bringing exhilarating and soulful music to the congregation of Mt. Zion, the Athens community and those lucky enough to hear them while they're touring across the country.

According to its director, Dr. Francine Childs, chairwoman of OU's Center for Afro-American Studies, its mission is two-fold: "To exalt the name of God in songs and to extend the hand of fellowship to all mankind."

The Gospel Voices was established in March 1975, when Childs and six OU students decided they needed a choir at Mt. Zion, Athens' only black church, at the corner of West Carpenter and Congress Streets.

Childs began recruiting students in her classes, found a piano player, and in April 1978, the choir was ready to give its first concert away from home, in Zanesville.

Today its active membership is about 35, according to Childs, and most of its members stay with the choir throughout their four years at OU.

"The young people always say I'm an inspiration to them," Childs said. "But I tell them what a joy it is for me to work with them."

Almost every year the Gospel Voices have toured during spring break, going as far and wide as Corpus Christi, Texas; Little Rock, Ark.; St. Louis, Mo.; and Providence, R.I. They have spent many weekends during the school year traveling to other churches throughout Ohio.

On the road with Ohio University emblazoned across the side of the bus, the Voices have "played an active role in many young people coming to OU," according to Childs. "We're representing OU as well as the Gospel Voices of Faith."

In Athens, the Voices have performed at OU residence halls, the Athens Mall, senior citizens centers, nursing homes, the Athens Mental Health Center and area schools.

Although Childs and most of the choir's members are firmly rooted in the Christian



Making a joyful noise at Mt. Zion Baptist Church are, from left, Karmen Mack, soloist Karla Jackson, and conductor Camarie King.



The Gospel Voices of Faith, from row from left, Director Dr. Francine Childs, Terri Robinson, Detries Freeman, Doreen Boggan, Billie Jeanne Robinson; second row, Marilyn Gantt (behind Childs), Terrie Dee Ray, Karmen Mack, Sandra Perkins, Camarie King, Yaulenia Carter, Jacqueline Mitchem; third row, Latée Felton, Rose

Feagin, Karla Jackson, Rhedeshia Young, Catrina Houston, Rudy Pringle, Charles Jones; fourth row, Willie Harris, Robert Floyd, Terry Pryor, Tim Pringle, Lyman Montgomery, Robert Saunders; fifth row, Anton Jones, George Dawkins, Merle McKinlin, Dwayne Dickens; last row, Joel Baker, Eric Barnes, Trevor Phillips.

faith, including opening their weekly rehearsals with Bible study. "We don't try to force anything on anybody. We just love them," she said.

Besides what it gives the church and Athens community, the choir also is important to its members. "I feel this group has really helped to fill a void in many students' lives," Childs said.

According to Eric Barnes, a senior from Cleveland Heights, "It's good to be with people who believe the same as you do. It's an encouragement."

Trevor Phillips, a senior from Cincinnati, called the choir "an opportunity to express my love for God and exercise my voice through song."

In its 13 years, only about four of the choir's members were studying music. "I would say the best were not music majors," Childs said.

This is the first year all the choir's members have been black, Childs said.

Story by MARY RADFORD
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Traveling funds in short supply

Although the Gospel Voices of Faith have traditionally spent their spring break on tour, traveling as far as Texas and New Jersey, this year they probably won't have the funds to go.

According to director Dr. Francine Childs, "We are bankrupt. We may not go on tour, although the bus is reserved." The Gospel Voices visit churches for free, taking an extra offering to help meet expenses.

The choir also has been trying to raise enough money to buy robes for its 35 or so members. The women currently wear black skirts and white blouses and the men dark suits. The robes cost about \$100 each, according to Childs.

Ohio University does offer some financial support to the choir, a non-profit campus organization, but only \$300 toward the robes and no money for travel.

"The greatest way to raise funds on this campus is to have a dance and we can't do this. It wouldn't be appropriate for our choir," she said.

Instead, choir members have taken pledge sheets to their home churches, which can sponsor a robe for \$125 and the tour for \$100.

Among the trips the Gospel Voices want to make this spring is to the National Gospel Festival in New York City in April. "We feel we can compete," Childs said. "We just need to get there."

Church is mainstay of black culture

"The church has been the steady force in Afro-American culture," according to Childs. "Every major movement that was ever begun sprang out of the black church."

"When you think of black leaders, you think of the church," she said.

Among the black leaders who got their start and their inspiration from the church were: Abolitionist Sojourner Truth (1797-1883); slave revolt leader Nat Turner (1800-1831); underground railroad "conductor" Harriet Tubman (1822-1913); Dr. Benjamin Hooks (born 1926), former executive director of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. (1929-1968), Nobel Peace Prize recipient and civil

rights leader; and the Rev. Jesse Jackson (born 1941), Democratic presidential candidate in 1988.

"The church was a place where people could go and let it all hang out, let go the pressures and frustrations of life," Childs said.

She attributes the church's role as a focal point to the fact that all were equal inside its doors.

"In the black church there were no social classes. If you could sing like an angel, you could be in the choir, you could be an usher, a member of the auxiliary. It didn't matter what your status, you could take part," she said.

The church remains an important force in black society, and much of its strength comes from music — spirituals in the South, gospel in the North. "Gospel music

is viewed as more urban, storefront church music," according to Childs.

She explained the effect gospel music has on most people: "It touches the inner depths of one's soul. The songs address perhaps things that people might really be feeling subconsciously but have not allowed to surface."

"Even people who may not consider themselves to be saved, when they hear gospel music, tears begin to stream down their eyes," she said.

Quoting a verse from a gospel hymn — God will supply my every need — Childs said, "That is something that touches the innermost depths of one's soul. When it's sung with meaning and power, the strongest person will break down."