

Ubuntu Choir is a beautiful thing

By Sharon Sheridan

(Episcopal News Service) The music group A Joyful Noise was rehearsing How Great Thou Art before the July 15 convention Eucharist, and tenor Sheila Phillip couldn't resist breaking into harmony in the midst of a conversation.

Every morning during convention, Phillip has arrived early at the worship hall to rehearse for the day's Eucharist as part of the Ubuntu Convention Choir. This is the first convention to feature a volunteer choir in addition to scheduled visiting musicians and ensembles. Seventy to eighty singers have participated each day.

"It's just been a wonderful outlet," said Deputy Anne Scheutte (Fond du Lac), a daily participant who usually sings at St. James' church, Manitowoc, Wisc. "The directors are so full of spirit, and they're just merry people. The rehearsals were very fun. I probably learned 50 new pieces of music this week."

Led by Dent Davidson and Julia Huttar Bailey, the singers tackled a wide variety of musical styles, coordinated with the guest performers. Phillip recalled how visiting musicians at the main Eucharist July 12 sang Richard Smallwood's anthem Total Praise.

"I was not supposed to be singing with them," she said, adding, "I could not contain myself. I jumped up and I joined them because I sing it in my choir."

Not all the music was so familiar.

"It was a challenge, especially when it came to the Spanish part of the music," said Phillip, a convention exhibitor with the Union of Black Episcopalians who sings at St. Andrew's, Bronx, N.Y. "I don't speak Spanish, but I sure sang in Spanish."

Directors and choristers pronounced the volunteer choir a success.

"I think it's a spectacular idea," said Chicago Bishop Jeffrey Lee, who sings bass and "tenor as needed."

"It provides a kind of rootedness in this community that's gathered here for convention," he said.

Davidson was music director at St. Thomas, Medina, Wash. when he was rector there, Lee said. Davidson now is missionary for liturgy and the arts in Lee's diocese.

"He's deeply committed to cultivating the gifts and talents of everybody; everybody can make beautiful music," Lee said. "He's a gift to this church."

Among the regular convention choristers, "The House of Bishops and spouses choir has been kind of a core," said Huttar Bailey, a seminarian who previously spent 23 years as a music director at St. Clare's in Ann Arbor, Mich.

"It's wonderful and joyful," said Davidson, who also conducts the bishops and spouses choir. "People feel invited to come all 10 days or one day."

Added Huttar Bailey, "We definitely have some 'groupies.'" That consistency made it possible to learn some of the new music they introduced, she noted. "I think most of the new stuff that we picked has been very accessible."

"Our whole goal," Davidson said, "has been to get all 3,500 people that are here singing, not to have choirs performing."

"They want to sing," Huttar Bailey said. "I can just hear people singing together, especially all during Communion, and that's powerful. It's nurturing people ... and it builds that community and that spirit."

It also provided visitors with a way to connect with convention, Phillip said. "You feel enriched. You get to meet people."
Lee said he was pleased to see the final service would include Make Your Service of Love a Beautiful Thing, a gospel-inspired work that's become the "theme song" for his diocese. "It will be a great way to have that Eucharist on the final day sending us out to do just that."