

# Church

## A Baptist is bringing the sounds of gospel to a Catholic church

By Michael D. Schaffer  
Inquirer Staff Writer

The sights and smells were unmistakably Catholic: the formal ritual, the pungent odor of incense, the red votive lights burning on the altar.

But the sounds were from a different tradition: young voices singing songs born long ago in the churches of black America, clapping their hands to the rhythm.

"Get on board, little children, get on board, little children, get on

board, little children, there's room for many more . . ." the children's gospel choir of St. Ignatius of Loyola Church sang at a Lenten service Wednesday night.

The 46-member choir was formed six years ago, according to Sister Michelle Callanan, principal of St. Ignatius parochial school at 43d and Wallace Streets in West Philadelphia.

"I wanted to make the church relevant to the people," Sister Michelle said.

St. Ignatius is a pre-

dominantly black parish, but nobody in the church knew how to run a gospel choir, she said. So the Catholics turned to a Baptist, Thomasina Johnson James, pianist at Pinn Memorial Baptist Church, 54th St. and Wynnefield Ave., to teach their children to sing gospel music.

"I train them from scratch," Mrs. James said before choir practice Tuesday afternoon. "I write music for them. We seem to have just a good rapport."

Sister Michelle leaves the training of the choir entirely up to her, Mrs. James said.

Mrs. James, who gave her age as "more than 50," said she has long experience teaching children to sing gospel music. She worked "for many, many years" with young singers at a United Methodist church in West Philadelphia, she said.

Her method of teaching is repetition, first of melody, then of words.

The children catch Mrs. James' love for gospel singing. "I have to be excited about it to get them excited," she said. "They get into it."

Differences between the Baptist and Catholic traditions didn't cause her any real problem, Mrs. James said. She said that she has

even used some Catholic chants in the music at Pinn Memorial.

"I think the gospel music heritage is there," whether the children are Protestant or Catholic, Mrs. James said. "They hear it on the radio, they hear it through their parents and grandparents."

Like St. Ignatius school, with a student body that is 46 percent Catholic, the choir is made up of Catholics and non-Catholics, so some of the singers were already familiar with gospel choirs at other churches.

For example, choir member Dormen Lisby, 11, said he regularly attended Liberty Baptist Church in the 5900 block of Larchwood St.

The young singers, who range from second to eighth grades, have enthusiasm, Mrs. James said. "I kind of had to hold them down," she said. The children want to move with the music, she said, "but we try to get them to move together."

"It sounds good and it's fast," said Dormen Lisby.

"They play a lot of fancy music," said Gregory Parker, 12, a fifth-grader at St. Ignatius.

The gospel choir has built a good reputation,



The gospel choir was formed to make St. Ignatius 'relevant' to a largely black parish.

Mrs. James said. "A lot of people have asked us to come and sing for their churches."

The choir usually sings at Mass on the third Sunday of the month, the only Sunday Mrs. James can get away from her duties at Pinn Memorial, Sister Michelle said.

Mrs. James couldn't be at the Wednesday night service, but sent her sister, Victoria Blackshear, organist at a Baptist church in South Philadelphia, as her substitute.

Sister Michelle said she was pleased with the way the gospel choir had developed. The choir creates a spirit of worship that is joyful and reverent, she said.

Worshippers at St. Ignatius seemed a little startled when they first heard the choir sing, Mrs. James said. "It was a little restrained," she recalled, "but after a while I saw the faces were smiling."

The gospel choir "startled" some parishioners at first because it reminded them of a religious tradition they had left behind and forgotten, said the Rev. James E. Locke, pastor of the church.

"We sing lovely music," said Lucinda Conix, 13, an eighth-grade student at St. Ignatius. "It's inspired the whole church . . . The grown-ups love it." Reprinted from the Philadelphia Inquirer

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