

ASKING THE CLERGY

Where gospel music gets its power

BY JIM MERRITT

Special to Newsday

Gospel music performance is not just a Grammy category, it's also a spiritually inspiring part of many Long Island worship services. This week's clergy discuss the value of a vocal tradition that draws on biblical themes and, according to the Library of Congress, is rooted in the call and response singing of the African American South.

THE REV. HENRIETTA SCOTT FULLARD

Presiding elder (retired), Long Island District, African Methodist Episcopal Churches

Gospel music is an expression of the body, mind and soul. It connects us to what God requires of us and to a tradition that dates to the Holy Bible. The Israelites were among those who sang praises to the Lord. In Exodus 15:1, Moses and the people of Israel sang praises to the Lord for his great victory over Pharaoh's chariots and army. We continue to praise the Lord in Gospel music, bringing forth God's message in spiritual and transformational ways. Gospel music is a sign of our acceptance of God's message. It expresses our gratitude for all of God's bountiful blessings. The power in the moment of singing reveals the power of God's

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work. The Holy Bible's Book of Psalms is actually a book of Gospel music. Psalms 5:11 says, "But let all those that put their trust in thee rejoice: Let them ever shout for joy, because thou defendest them: Let them also that love thy name be joyful in thee." Gospel music brings us closer to the throne of God and the beautiful presence of the Holy Spirit in our midst.

SHAREESE HARRIS

Evangelist, Grace Cathedral International, Uniondale

Elton John once said, "Music has healing power. It has the ability to take people out of themselves for a few hours." But what is this power, and how is it uniquely felt through Gospel music? In biblical times, music was a way for King David to liberate, release and magnify God during his most difficult moments. His profound compositions birthed the entire book of Psalms. Gospel music's spiritual power can also

be traced to the era of slavery, when it served as a beacon of hope and a means of psychological and emotional liberation for the oppressed. Enslaved Africans used spirituals to covertly communicate messages, express their sorrows and maintain a sense of identity and resilience. These songs provided unity and strength, enabling them to endure the unimaginable hardships they faced. The true power of Gospel music lies within the source of the words being sung. These lyrics are not just expressions of the soul or raw emotions; they are imbued with scriptures and anchored in the hope of the one true and living God, Jesus Christ. The spiritual power of Gospel music is the synthesis of holy scriptures and divine inspiration from the artist, creating a sound of hope, liberation, breakthrough and joy for anyone who listens. It transcends mere entertainment, offering profound spiritual upliftment and emotional solace. In this way, Gospel music continues to be a

powerful force for spiritual renewal and healing.

THE REV. DAVID CARL OLSON

Associate Minister for Congregational Life, Unitarian Universalist Congregation at Shelter Rock

The choir of the Shelter Rock Unitarian Universalist congregation recently had a concert on the history of Gospel music. It spanned from traditional spirituals through early Gospel and into more contemporary sounds. Under the direction of Nigel W. Gretton, and with the participation of local Gospel artists, we experienced more than a concert. It became a service of worship. Our religious tradition embraces pluralism. One power of Gospel music can be found in its capacity to bridge difference and provide emotional connections in the human experience of overcoming challenges. In congregation-based community organizing in Unitarian Universalist congregations across the country, the sharing of Gospel music by interreligious audiences expects that we will find commonalities in the human desires for freedom and for victory, even in the face of insurmountable odds. Not all Unitarian Universalists find the Christian message of the Gospel compelling, but we heed the advice of 16th century founder Frances David: "We need not think alike to love alike." With humility, many of us find inspiration in the Gospel songs that tell of our connections to a world that is yet to be, to a power greater than ourselves.