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Liturgical jazz band answers calling to evangelism

Retta Blaney | Sep. 28, 2012

One Sunday morning this past June, seven American revolutionaries staged an assault on the sensibilities of some 800 worshipers gathered at England?s Canterbury Cathedral for the 11 a.m. service, causing them to react in a most un-British way.

They applauded. For several minutes. And Dean Robert Willis was gobsmacked.

?English people don?t clap in church,? Willis declared, calling the service ?an absolute triumph? and thanking the young Americans for ?loosening up the whole church.?

Those rebels who shook up centuries of Anglican tradition were the seven musicians who make up the Theodicy Jazz Collective. They were in England to offer the world premiere of their commissioned work, ?Canterbury Jazz Mass,? a five-movement Latin Mass, for which they were joined by the cathedral?s choir.

?It?s a really neat way to put brushstrokes on prayers, to bring them to life in a really cool way, a blending of ancient and modern,? said Andy Barnett, Theodicy?s 28-year-old founder and band leader. ?Jazz brings freedom into structure so there?s room for the spirit to move. It?s finding a middle path between freedom and structure.?

That spirit will be moving again this fall when ?Canterbury Jazz Mass: Tradition, Innovation and Christian Discipleship? has its American premiere Oct. 24 at Yale Divinity School in New Haven, Conn., accompanied by the choir of Christ Church of New Haven.

?I hadn?t really thought of jazz as a middle way,? Barnett said. ?I really stumbled into it, but now I see it has potential for Christian community.?

During a phone interview from his home in New Lebanon, N.Y., Barnett, who is an Episcopal priest, as well as a music director and environmental science teacher at the Darrow School, a private boarding school in New Lebanon, shared how he was drawn, seemingly by accident, into this calling, which he now sees as ?the evangelism of the 21st century.?

Raised Episcopalian in Minneapolis, he had little experience with jazz until, as a student at Ohio?s Oberlin College, he was asked to start an evening service for students at Christ Episcopal Church. An organist who also played in a Christian rock band, Barnett considered those the only two forms that represented church music. He reached out to Sarah Politz, a classmate who played the trombone, and they began to flavor the liturgy with the rhythms and the blues of jazz.

It worked so well they were asked to play at Trinity Episcopal Cathedral in Cleveland. Over two years this ?morphed into a jazz service? that combined the Anglican Eucharist with jazz improvisation. While the congregation said the prayers they knew, the musicians -- on trombone, bass, drums and piano and with a singer -- backed them up with appropriate rhythms. In the case of the Psalm, for instance, everyone sang the eight-measure antiphon, then while the congregation read the verses the musicians improvised the music.

?We were not just playing at them, we went out of our way to include them in singing with us,? Barnett said. ?We want mystery, spice in our life, for beauty that connects us with the holy. Jazz is a good way to do that.?

And that was how Barnett began to see jazz as evangelism.

?People just started coming. It really took off, especially with young families. It was uninhibited joy, and it was consistent with the Gospel. It was an important seed, that service.?

The seed continued to bear fruit when Barnett went to Berkeley Divinity School at Yale and brought his jazz evangelism to the Episcopal Church of St. Paul and St. James in New Haven, where he served as music director through his last two years of school. During that time, he says, attendance nearly doubled and giving nearly tripled.

?It became a robust, hearty community and everybody there sort of felt the joy with the music or the mood of the blues,? he said. ?It was a deep call for action. It empowered people to keep on following Jesus.?

He began hearing comments from parishioners about how the service carried them through the week. ?It kept me going too. It reminded me this music is so packed with liberation and filled with joy you almost can?t help but move, and that gives people the will to keep going, and the church, too.?

Each year Berkeley students made a pilgrimage to Canterbury Cathedral. Barnett had no way of knowing just how much this experience would change his life when it was his turn to go. ?When I heard the first note from the choir, they had me,? he said.

Wanting to hear more, he asked David Flood, the organist and master of choristers, if he could attend a rehearsal. Flood said yes, and Barnett invited him out for a drink afterward. Barnett played a recording of some of Theodicy?s liturgical jazz, then took a bold leap and asked if the group could play at Canterbury.

?It was such a ridiculous thing to do,? he said. ?They?re the mother church of the Anglican Communion. They don?t mess around.? But Flood recognized that Theodicy was on to something, and so it was arranged that the group would return in a year with a commissioned work.

From that time Barnett and sax player Will Cleary, whom Barnett credits with being the major force behind the Jazz Mass, composed music ?completely from scratch? to accompany the ancient Latin prayers of the church -- Kyrie, Gloria, Doxology, Sanctus and Benedictus. Ann Phelps, the group?s singer, planned the 10-day trip, which grew to include offerings at Sheffield Cathedral, two other churches and the seminaries at Oxford and Cambridge.

In preparation and as a way to refine their work, the ensemble, which also includes David Chevan, Charlie Dye and Jonathan Parker, played numerous times between September 2011 and June of this year. ?The group really came into its own,? Barnett said. ?We played jazz in church every Sunday. The project was accidental but it was filled with the cooperation of the Holy Spirit.?

The Holy Spirit wasn?t the only member of the Trinity associated with the music. While on tour in Great

Britain, the group played for a confirmation service at St. Peter and St. Paul?s Church in Great Missenden. Bishop Alan Wilson sensed the tension from the congregants upon learning that they?d be hearing jazz in church. ?Jazz is a great metaphor for what Jesus is calling the church to be,? he assured them.

The tour was so successful that many of the venues have expressed hope that Theodicy will return. The group will also offer ?Rhythm, Blues, and Proclamation: Jazz as a Resource for Church? in February 2013 at the University of the South in Sewanee, Tenn.

?It?s evangelism for the 21st century because it?s so multicultural -- rhythms of Africa, instrumentation and harmony from Europe,? Barnett said. ?It?s God?s people?s yearning for liberation. I hope it will be a model of progressive evangelism and send people out to be the hands and feet of God.?

[Retta Blaney is the author of *Working on the Inside: The Spiritual Life Through the Eyes of Actors*.]

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