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This church is paying 'royalties' when it sings spirituals composed by enslaved Africans



Choir members at the United Parish in Brookline sing spirituals during a Sunday service on Oct. 31, 2021.

Craig LeMoult / GBH News

By **Craig LeMoult**

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Brookline church's "royalties" program for Negro spirituals

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A hundred or so masked parishioners in the pews of the **United Parish in Brookline** joined together at a recent service and sang "Lord, I Want To Be A Christian In My Heart."

This song, like many that churches sing all over the country, comes from a musical tradition of spirituals originally composed by African people enslaved in America. As a national reckoning with racism has grown over the last year or so, members of the United Parish began asking whether it was appropriate for the predominantly white church to sing these songs. To address those concerns, the church introduced a unique program to help carry on the legacy of this music in Roxbury, and they're hoping to be a model for others.

"There was growing discomfort around how to use Negro spirituals, appropriately and respectfully," said the congregation's minister of music Susan DeSelms.

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That debate within the church heated up, she said, after the murder of George Floyd.

"And it brought up a lot of emotions from a lot of people and I started thinking about, 'Well, what can make this right? What can make this not feel terrible? And

how do we get through this?" DeSelms said. "I mean, we have a sign on our church that says 'Black Lives Matter,' but, what else? You know, what else you want to do about that?"

DeSelms addressed the issue head on in a recent homily at the church.

"We're talking about Negro spirituals today," she said when she stepped to the lectern.

She began by addressing that word, which she said is the preferred term for this music in Black communities.

"Words matter," DeSelms said to the congregation. "And while using the word 'Negro,' even in this context, gives me discomfort, I can acknowledge that the discomfort is mine and it comes from the shame I feel as a white person of privilege."

DeSelms recounted the history of the music, beginning in 1619 when the first Africans were brought to America as slaves, and continuing through to today, with these songs so ingrained into the canon of American folk music that many don't even realize which are Negro spirituals.

When a church buys sheet music, the composers – or their estates – usually get some of that money as royalties. But the enslaved people who created this music were never rewarded for their art. So DeSelms had an idea, which she announced at the service.

"Today, we as a church will begin the practice of collecting 'royalties' ... for the spirituals we sing and worship," she said. "Whenever we sing Negro spirituals. we will collect an offering that will support the development of Black musicians."

Those "royalties," as DeSelms is calling them, will be donated to a nonprofit youth music program in Roxbury called **Hamilton-Garrett Music and Arts**. The organization is devoted to carrying on the tradition of the Negro spiritual by teaching these songs to the next generation. The group's executive director, Gerami Groover-Flores, said it's important to call them "Negro spirituals."



Members of the Hamilton-Garrett Music and Arts youth choir rehearse "Ride On King Jesus."

"Removing 'Negroes' from the title, I think it does an injustice to the people who created this art form," Groover-Flores said. "And yes, it's uncomfortable. But the lyrics also reflect the uncomfortable times that they were living in."

The United Parish in Brookline is helping to carry on the legacy of this music, she said, by recognizing that history, and by making the donations.

"They are in some ways repaying the individuals who created this music because you're supporting their descendants," Groover-Flores said. "You're supporting the next generation of their lineage to continue the work and the mission of preserving this art form, of preserving this history."

Groover-Flores didn't always think that white churches should sing this music.

"I think at one time in my life, I used to feel frustrated about it, to be fully transparent," she said. "I think that was just because of the fact that I wasn't quite sure that the individuals who were singing it truly understood the history behind it."

But she said she now thinks they need more people to embrace this music, and learn from it, to really preserve it.

"So if it's being sung in churches that represent other ethnic groups or in other faiths, I think that that is wonderful," she said – as long as churches take a moment when singing these songs to educate their congregations and remind them about where they come from.



Members of the Hamilton-Garrett Music and Arts youth choir sing spirituals at the Roxbury nonprofit's rehearsal space.

Craig LeMoult / GBH News

At the same time the Brookline church was working through these issues, the music minister at Montview Church in Denver started pursuing a similar idea.

Adam Waite said his predominantly white, privileged congregation could either ignore how Black artists have been treated in this country or acknowledge that history. The church is developing what it calls a reparations royalty program, which could potentially include a donation any time they perform a song from any Black composer.

"That's a choice we need to make ... to actively engage with our history, to be honest about our history," Waite said. "And hopefully that will make us a better community."

He reached out to discuss the concept with the Center for Congregational Song, the Washington, D.C.-based resource arm of The Hymn Society. Center director Brian Hehn then crafted **a framework** that other houses of worship can use to develop their own initiatives.

"We have to de-center our own feelings. This is not about alleviating our guilt," Hehn said. "Rather, it's about inspiring our communities to build deeper relationships with people who look, think, act differently than we do, and have different historical realities than we do."

Around the country, some white churches have been grappling for years with the appropriate way to sing these songs.

Emmett G. Price III, pastor of Community of Love Christian Fellowship in Allston and the dean of Africana studies at the Berklee College of Music, believes context is essential to using Negro spirituals. He said a lack of understanding and clarity results in congregations appropriating – or misappropriating – these complex and powerful songs.

"There are other congregations who have brought in consultants to help teach performance practice," said Price, who also hosts GBH's *All Rev'd Up* podcast. "There are other congregations who have brought in consultants to contextualize the music so that the folks who are singing the music actually understand what

they're singing, since it comes from a different cultural background and a different cultural expression."

But Price said he's never before seen churches make financial contributions like this.

"This whole thing about the royalties for spirituals actually puts your wallet where your mouth is," he said.

Price said this is a great model for racial reconciliation. But he does think it has its limits.

"I don't think every white church in America has the capacity, has the vision, has the people who will catch the vision," he said.

Groover-Flores is more optimistic about the royalty idea spreading and supporting more groups like her youth choir.

"That is my vision," she said. "Not that it stops and only comes to Hamilton-Garrett."

She wants to see this program become a model for other churches.

"So let's start having these conversations, building these partnerships, where we can start to give the acknowledgment back to those who have created such a beautiful art form that we celebrate today," she said.

This story was updated to include efforts at Montview Church in Denver and the Center for Congregational Song.



Craig LeMoult @clemoult

Craig reports on a wide range of topics, including environmental and public health issues. He's covered the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2018 gas explosions in the Merrimack Valley. Craig's stories have brought listeners flying

over the Arctic Ocean and up close with whales and sharks. Previously, Craig reported for 7 years at WSHU in Connecticut. He's the recipient of two national Edward R. Murrow Awards and a national Sigma Delta Chi award, as well as many regional honors, including a 2020 Murrow for "excellence in sound." He's a graduate of the Columbia Journalism School and Tufts University.

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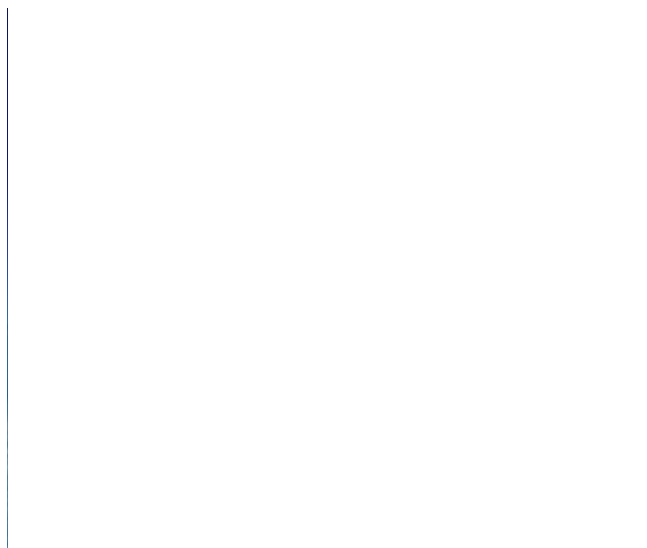
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