

Choir takes 'trip of a lifetime' to perform at White House

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Last month, 54 Midlanders traveled more than 3,300 miles to share three hours of Christmas carols with more than 500 people, all within the time span of three days. Sound exhausting? For the First United Methodist Church choir, it was worth every minute.

After getting some much-needed rest and enjoying the holidays, FUMC Director of Music Ministries, Dr. Thomas Vozzella, and choir members Jo Ann Collett and Carol Hall shared some of the highlights from their Dec. 10-12 trip to Washington, D.C. By invitation from President and Mrs. Bush, and through the arrangements of Jann Bash and Susie Evans, the choir of 44 people, along with a few family

members, made the trip to the Capital to sing at two private parties at the White House.

With only six weeks notice before their trip, the choir started adding rehearsals to their already-busy holiday schedule.

"People put in hours and hours of rehearsal time," Vozzella said.

Collett joked they might as well have set up beds in the rehearsal hall, but noted the extra time together and time spent traveling has created a tight-knit group of singers.

"It brought us together as a group," she said.

"The choir's moved to another level now," Hall said, adding, "the whole thing was a success because of Tom's work."

After long hours preparing in Midland, the group arrived in Washington, D.C., on Dec. 10, rehearsed and performed Dec. 11 and flew back to Midland Dec. 12.

"Wednesday night we went on a tour of the city to see all the decorations," Vozzella said.

Thursday morning the choir spent two hours rehearsing at Asbury United Methodist Church, a historic church founded in 1836.

"Those people bent over backward to make us feel welcome," Hall said of the congregation at Asbury. "They just outdid themselves to make us feel welcome and tell us about the history of their church."

That history includes being "very active in the underground railroad" as well as being the site from which Martin Luther King Jr. organized his march on Washington during the Civil Rights Movement, Vozzella said.

After their morning rehearsal, the choir headed to the White House for the first of their two planned performances. After signing the guest book, the group sang from 11 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. in the East Room for congressional staff during an invitation-only congressional office open house.

Following this performance, the Midlanders had an opportunity to tour the White House and view the holiday decorations.

"It was all red, white and blue," Collett said of the festive decor. "It was beautiful."

That evening the choir, including FUMC's minister Dr. Tim Walker and his wife, Karen, performed at a private party hosted by the president and first lady.

Positioned in a room close to the entrance to the party, approximately 500 people who attended the event stopped to listen to the singers.

"We sang from 5 to 6:30 p.m. at one of the three private parties the Bushes have every year," explained Hall. "They had a lot of Midlanders there, so we saw people we knew."

Collett said the first lady's mother, Jenna Welch, who is a member of FUMC, was at the party where the choir performed.

An hour into the performance, the Bushes greeted members of the choir and then joined them in singing Christmas carols.

One of the carols, called "Children See Him," was written especially for the occasion by Vozzella and Hall. The two composed the music and lyrics and appropriately titled the melody "Midland." They have submitted the piece for inclusion in the new United Methodist Hymnal.

The choir also performed music composed by another Midlander, Randall "Randy" Bass, and they were accompanied by Midland native son, Eddie Pleasant, who now sings professionally in New York.

That evening, the group attended a banquet at Ebbetts Grill, organized by choir member Sherry Green.

Collett, Hall and Vozzella agreed it was a wonderful experience for the choir, whose members range in age from high schoolers to those in their 80's.

"That was a good exercise in intergenerational travel," Hall said, joking. "Three hours of singing in one day, plus a tour and a two-hour rehearsal was a hard day.

"From 6:30 that morning until 6:30 that night we had formal dresses and tuxedos on ... in the rain."

"It was worth it, though," said Collett, "It was the trip of a lifetime."

