

A WORD FROM EBERSWALDE, GERMANY
ABOUT GOSPEL MUSIC AND THE WESTEND GOSPEL SINGERS

The Westend Gospel Singers were founded eighteen years ago. In 1996 Pastor Hanns-Peter Giering of Eberswalde, Germany, together with his wife Karin, placed an ad in the local paper with the query "Who wants to join us in singing Gospel music?" The inspiration for this move came from a woman in their congregation. Pastor Hanns-Peter Giering, pastor/director of the Westend Gospel Singers writes:

This invitation to sing gospel music began as an attempt to bring members of the Eberswalde congregation together with un-churched neighbors. From the beginning the choir has been more of a congregational initiative into the community than a musical opportunity for the congregation alone. Again and again, we came upon persons moved by our singing and discovering for themselves the joy that comes from singing this form of American church music.

We are frequently asked, "Why do German congregations sing American songs in English?"

The culture of classical music pervades the German landscape. World-renowned composers of German origin: Bach, Handel, Mozart, Haydn, and many more were leaders in its development. The German church shares great pride in the German musical heritage. Modern music, with its rhythms, is not encouraged. Even though most Germans prefer listening to modern music in the privacy of their home or car, that same music has struggled to gain broad acceptance in the church.

Because of political developments in East Germany following 1945, many persons turned their backs on church membership.* Consequently, many regard the church as stuffy and old-fashioned.

American gospel music provides a new impulse. It teaches us to be more open and free with our emotions. Besides, it is simply fun to sing! Since our youth study English in school, they have absolutely no difficulty singing it. In addition, much of the popular music heard in Germany is sung in the English language. In recent years gospel music has greatly enriched the music of our national church. Gospel choirs have developed in congregations all over Germany.

Gospel music attracts the most diverse people, extending an invitation to faith and God. It also carries listeners along with it; it imparts *joi de vivre*, encourages people in their daily living, and moves them to reflect upon their lives and faith. We sing gospel for all these reasons. It reminds us of many meaningful experiences, many happy hours of singing. For some time now gospel music has been accepted as a regular feature of our worship services.

* The communist regime of the former German Democratic Republic set out to wither the church to nothing. They were successful to the degree that today only 25% of people living in former East Germany count themselves as Christians. Many are unfamiliar with what goes on in a congregation, never having darkened the door of a church. In this context gospel choirs serve as a means of evangelism, an avenue through which persons can become acquainted with church life and the Christian faith, perhaps even themselves becoming Christian, being baptized, and joining the church.

Many area churches invite the Westend Gospel Singers to sing this music as a guest choir for their congregation. When the Eberswalde congregation holds a public event, the choir is often a part of it. In the past we have frequently performed with other choirs. Every year we participate in the Berlin-Brandenburg Gospel Choir Gathering, held for the first time eighteen years ago in Eberswalde. Since then it has been held every other year, each time attracting about 400 singers.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a pastor of our church province who brought recordings of gospel music back with him when returning after his last visit to America. His thinking influenced the post-war generation of our church. But it was less his enthusiasm for this music than other influences that brought gospel music to a wider audience. The person of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., whose struggle for justice and martyr's death are renowned in eastern Germany; Mahalia Jackson, the Golden Gate Quartet, and others spread gospel music in Europe on tour. Although Gospel music was received with enthusiasm from the start, it took time before we in European congregations gained the confidence to sing this music ourselves.

Now the Westend Gospel Singers have received the special invitation to once again travel to America, the home of gospel music, and to sing our interpretation of the Gospel sound. We were thrilled to come to Wisconsin in 2006 and 2010, when we sang in UCC congregations and with their choirs. On that trip we had our first encounter with Robert Robinson, gospel singer from Minneapolis, Minnesota, who led a workshop on our behalf. In 2008 and 2012 we rejoiced to welcome The Gospellers from the Wisconsin Conference UCC to Germany—in Eberswalde, Berlin, throughout east central Germany, and even a side trip to Poland. As we had learned from Robert the songs he had taught us, we were able to sing together with the Wisconsin choir. In fact, the whole tour was built around choir fellowship. Now we will even experience Chicago, the home of gospel music, and once again feel your spirit and share with you our music and fellowship.

We look forward to meeting the people of your congregations in Wisconsin and Illinois, We look forward to what we will learn them, and what we will see. We anticipate with joy the experience we will share together. We celebrate that you will join us in singing and feeling the gospel joy—a joy in the Good News of what God has done for us.

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