

Singing Churchmen plant seeds in 'a place of great spiritual darkness'

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Five years ago, the Mississippi Baptist Singing Churchmen toured New England in the hopes of encouraging pastors in a secular setting. This year, after many obstacles and closed opportunities to form another mission trip since then, the Singing Churchmen, composed of 24 men and two accompanying wives, returned to New England with an expanded purpose in mind.

Steve Hamrick, Minister for Worship and Media at First Church, Greenville, was in the Churchmen from 1996-2002 and rejoined the group when he returned to Mississippi in 2019 following retirement. In between, he served a church in Illinois and later became the Director of Worship and Technology for the Illinois Baptist State Association for 12 years.

"The executive team has talked about a mission trip since the end of Covid," said Hamrick, now serving as the Singing Churchmen President for the first time. "Our men are mission-minded, and it is a passion of the group to serve. We originally had planned to go to the Dakotas in 2024, but the Lord closed those doors. Not surprisingly, however, He opened an opportunity to help meet the needs of New England.

"Our primary placement was with Northeastern Baptist College (NEBC) in Bennington, Vermont. This was the churchmen's second trip to NEBC. We helped the college in building apartments, guest-lectured in many classes, and worked in the library, among other projects. We also sang at several churches, downtown in the city square, and several outreach concerts

during the week. We partnered with the Baptist Churches of New England (BCNE) and led two sound and technology workshops.”

Bobby Sanderson, the Singing Churchmen Missions Coordinator and part-time Minister of Music at Pleasant Hill Church, has been in the churchmen since 1999, serving on six mission trips with them.

“We went with a specific aim



from The Mississippi Baptist Singing Churchmen perform a concert of during their recent tour of New England. (Photo credit: Matthew Gaddy)

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“We were able to host two different seminars for the BCNE, one in the Boston area and one in New Hampshire. Dividing into two teams, we visited churches and provided training for operating with sound equipment,” said Kris Smith, Worship Ministries Director of the Mississippi Baptist Convention Board (MBCB). “Churches within Boston are often large or medium-sized, but

in the rural cities, you won't find large churches. Even one of the more successful Baptist churches ran about 75 in attendance. Their worship leaders are volunteers, but they have significant responsibilities, so our desire was to not only help them but encourage them."

After purchasing a sound system for the outdoor concerts, the Singing Churchmen joyfully donated the equipment to the BCNE. One of the most memorable concerts, however, had no microphones nor speakers nor an acoustically friendly sanctuary. Before the trip, a pastor of a hosting church had fallen ill to the point he went mute for a time, unable to attend the concert presented for his congregation as he lay in the hospital. The church could have understandably backed out from hosting the Singing Churchmen with meals and the use of their fellowship hall, but instead they welcomed them with all the more joy.

Soon the pastor was well enough to return and could speak again. He invited the Singing Churchmen to his home, where he told them how the previous owner of the house used to assemble a string quartet and invite neighbors to bring lawn chairs, sit in front of his house, and enjoy the music played on his porch. So on that Sunday afternoon, the pastor asked the eager Churchmen to give a concert on that very same porch, and invited his neighbors, some of whom were not followers of Jesus, to that very same yard. The Churchmen were able not only to sing beautiful melodies, but they also weaved a Gospel presentation into the middle of the front-porch concert, at the request of the pastor.



Onlookers watch as the Mississippi Baptist Singing Churchmen perform a concert on the front porch of a local pastor during their recent tour of New England. (Photo credit: Matthew Gaddy)

“It was really special,” said Smith, “planting seeds in an outdoor concert downtown or on the front porch of a pastor’s house, singing, leading worship, and sharing with folks that may or may not have ever heard the Gospel before.”

With five years having passed since the first time the Singing Churchmen visited New England, this year’s trip geared toward the college and communities was sure to sing a different tune.

“Back in May,” recalled Hamrick, “Kris Smith, Bobby Sanderson, and I took a preparatory trip to New England and met with Dr. Mark Ballard, President of NEBC, as well as several leaders from the BCNE. They helped us understand the post-Christian culture as well as set up trainings, concerts, and work projects. The planning team also held Zoom conferences with local pastors in preparation for the trip.

“All of us were surprised at how much theological drift has happened in the Northeast. The area we served was literally the birthplace of our country, the first and second Great Awakenings, the homes and ministries of D.L. Moody and C.I. Scofield, the beginnings of foreign missions, and the starting place of student ministries. We were told and witnessed for ourselves that New England is now between 3-5% evangelical Christians. We were also surprised to understand that ‘evangelical’ is generally perceived by New Englanders as a ‘right wing political radical.’ The term ‘follower of Jesus’ is much more effective when communicating.



The Mississippi Baptist Singing Churchmen pray over a couple during their recent tour of New England. (Photo credit: Matthew Gaddy)

“We also learned that New England is all about freedom.

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“We were surprised at the number of churches we passed who had pride flags out in front of them,” added Sanderson. “We went to D.L. Moody’s birthplace, his gravesite, and saw the schools he had founded, and we stood where Jonathan Edwards preached ‘Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.’ We went to the Haystack Monument where the modern missions movement started. We stood in front of Jonathan Edwards’ church where a sign shares about its history, and then immediately adjacent to that were signs advertising homosexual bazaars. New England is

a place of great spiritual darkness right now, with many churches teaching false doctrines. NEBC is a light in that darkness, so we feel it's important to encourage and to support them."

Although the burden is heavy, and although no salvations were made in the conversations on the streets, the Singing Churchmen recognized that within five years since their last trip, strangers seemed more receptive to the Gospel this time. The churches that seek to make disciples of Jesus and not followers of the flesh, do not work alone nor without authority. God is working on the hearts of man.

"One thing I hope the Churchmen take home with them," Smith remarked as he reflected on the trip, "is the realization that there is a lot of work to be done here in our country, and we have great opportunities to minister right here at our backdoor. Living here in the Bible Belt, we think there are good churches around every corner, but that is not the case everywhere. I also pray we consider how that theological drift happened there, that we would be aware of it happening so that we can be a part of revitalizing and reinvigorating the Kingdom work taking place here and in New England.

"Overall, the trip was not about concerts. It was about the Gospel presentation within our songs. The songs we sing are the Gospel, and so whether we sang them in a church or outside, we proclaimed the Gospel. We just put it to notes and music. We were very pleased with how the Lord worked out the details and how the churchmen took time to make this trip. I think they came back with a renewed passion for leading worship here at home and an understanding that there is work to be done."