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The Singing and Praying Bands
of Delaware and Maryland:



**A Sacred Service from the African American
Methodist Prayer Meetings and Camp Meetings
of the Mid-Atlantic Tidewater**

**Thursday
August 23, 2012**

12 NOON – 1 PM

Coolidge Auditorium

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The Singing and Praying Bands of Delaware and Maryland: A Sacred Service from the African American Methodist Prayer Meetings and Camp Meetings of the Mid-Atlantic Tidewater

History:

The Singing and Praying Bands maintain an unbroken tradition of worship, which combines Methodist prayer meeting practice with a ring shout, and which developed among African American Methodists in the mid-Atlantic in the early 19th century. A ring shout is a blend of various West African traditions of song and circle dancing. Current scholarly thought is that the development of the ring shout in the antebellum era was instrumental in the creation of a unified African-American identity.

Before there were church buildings and preachers, members of the small rural African American communities in the mid-Atlantic held their religious services in secret outdoor meetings and later in private homes. With the establishment of institutional churches, these local groups were incorporated into Methodist practice, and they and the ring shouts they practiced found a place for themselves, not in Sunday morning church services, but in prayer meetings held in the church building on Sunday evenings and weekday nights.

Beginning in the late 19th century, many of these churches sponsored large annual multi-day camp meetings on their church grounds to which the public was invited. These camp meetings, organized by leaders of the prayer meetings, aimed both to convert sinners and to raise money for the host church. Prayer meeting groups from nearby churches came and held their own services in fellowship with the sisters and brothers of the host church. Referring to the traveling group as a "Singing and Praying Band," each ensemble had its distinctive uniform and developed its own distinct song repertoire and style of singing. Each had a particular day and a particular time during the camp when it alone would perform. This network of camp meetings as a whole—never part of official Methodist discipline, and hosting an African-derived tradition of ring shouting—grew into a regional, semi-organized, African-derived folk religion that involved over a hundred churches and thousands of active tradition bearers. Despite the size and importance of the tradition, the Singing and Praying Band has remained unknown to outsiders until recently.

The Service:

Until the mid-20th century, men and women sat in pews on opposite sides of the sanctuary during prayer meetings. Thus seated, they would line out multi-versed hymns and intersperse the singing with elaborate prayers. At the end of the meeting, members would rise from the pews and come forward to the cross-aisle of the church, form a ring and sing what the bands call a "straight hymn," a short refrain repeated over and over. Individual members would move to the center of the ring and add a rhymed couplet to the refrain, providing a biblical verse or story to the refrain to reinforce its message.

At the regional camp meetings, the bands combined the lined-out hymns of the prayer meetings and the straight hymns of the ring shout into one seamless service. From the beginning of the service, men and women both would come forward to the cross aisle and sing. Beforehand, leaders, called "captains," placed a long bench, called a mourners' bench, in this space in front of the altar rail. The band brothers stood in lines on one side of the bench

facing the congregation, while the sisters stood on the opposite side of the bench, backs to the congregation, facing the men. Those seeking to be converted would kneel at the mourners' bench and pray. This is how the Singing and Praying Band service that the audience will see today took shape.

A hymn leader in the center of the ensemble lines out—the bands say "gives out"—the first hymn. The singing begins slowly and hesitantly. Yet with each verse the pitch rises, the tempo escalates and the singing gets more spirited. The Holy Spirit begins to animate the singing. The ensemble sings the last line of the hymn over and over and over as a meditation.

A band captain chooses one member to pray a prayer that implores the Spirit to grace those who are present. Another give-out hymn is raised, another prayer offered. At an unrehearsed moment during the service, a shout breaks out and the Spirit runs from heart to heart and breast to breast.

Finally, another member raises the triumphant, joyous straight hymn. The band forms a circle and sings, marches around the sanctuary, and again forms a circle and sings until one of the captains calls for the service to end.

Audience Participation:

The purpose of the service is to invoke the Holy Spirit with such immediacy that those within hearing distance cannot resist the call to join in the communion. The audience today is encouraged to clap along with the singers, to stand and move as the singers move, and if you feel so inclined, and to join the ring. Keep in mind, however, that participation in the ring itself is considered a religious, not musical, act.

Jonathan David, Ph.D.
Writer and Independent Scholar

For Further Information:

David, Jonathan C. and Richard Holloway. *Together Let Us Sweetly Live: The Singing and Praying Bands*. Champaign Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007

On One Accord: The Singing and Praying Bands of Tidewater Maryland and Delaware [A Documentary Recording and descriptive booklet written by Jonathan David] Global Village Music C/CD 225, 1992.

Stuckey, Sterling, "Introduction: Slavery and the Circle of Community," in *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America*. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 3-97.

The American Folklife Center was created by Congress in 1976 and placed at the Library of Congress to "preserve and present American folklife" through programs of research, documentation, archival preservation, reference service, live performance, exhibition, public programs, and training. The Center includes the American Folklife Center Archive of folk culture, which was established in 1928 and is now one of the largest collections of ethnographic material from the United States and around the world. Please visit our web site <http://www.loc.gov/folklife/>.

