

St. Thomas Choirs prepare for England performances

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(Photo: Al Lassen/For the Enquirer)

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For Alexis Stark, the alto section leader for the St. Thomas Choirs of Battle Creek's St. Thomas Episcopal Church, next year's two-week trip to England will be memorable enough.

But, if she can make it work out, it will be even more fabulous, so to speak.

"We're going to Lincoln Cathedral and it's on the same latitude as Liverpool, so I'm going over to do a Beatles pilgrimage too," she said with a laugh.

And while she plans to make a trip to the hometown of the renowned Fab Four, she also understands the real reason for the journey.

"For me, I've traveled quite a bit but most of it has come from being with a choir," she said. "It's amazing how music can take you anywhere."

And from Aug. 7-21 next year, the choir of 32 singers (20 adults and 12 kids ages 8-14) will perform almost daily at two famous cathedrals in England.

There will be performances by the entire choir, by men only, by women only and by the treble choristers, the youth singers.

The first week of the journey will take the group to Canterbury, west of London, where they will sing in the 900-year-old Canterbury Cathedral. The second week, they will travel to Lincoln, north of London, and sing in the 700-year-old Lincoln Cathedral.

"This is a work trip for us but it will be life-changing and spiritual," said Stephen White, the music director and parish administrator for St. Thomas who has been planning this trip for nearly three years. "Singing historical music in historical spaces like this, the history is just amazing."

It is also significant that the two cathedrals are focal points of the Anglican Church, which is intertwined with the Episcopal Church.

"It's just great to see the birthplace of the faith," Stark said.

White has been the church's musical director since he returned to the area from Dallas in 2011.

A native of Charlotte, he taught music at W.K. Kellogg Middle School, Battle Creek Central High and the old Southwestern Middle School.

Upon his return to the area, he always had his eye on a special trip that would showcase the church's choir.

"The church music is bigger than the four walls that surround Battle Creek," he said.

The groundwork was laid in 2012 when the choir sang at the Cathedral Church of St. Paul in Detroit and the following year when it went to the Chicago area for weekend performances.

"We wanted to know what was next," White said.

And he found out soon enough when an invitation arrived from the Anglican Church in England, saying there was an opening to sing at the two cathedrals in August 2016.

After getting the go-ahead from Rector Brian Coleman, White sent a recording of the choir to officials in England and the plans formed.

Stark, in her sixth year with the choir, said that even though the trip was ambitious, from the earliest days she had no doubt it would come together.

"I see my friends who don't travel much and they see it as impossible," she said. "But Stephen is such a dedicated and driven director, I knew he'd make it happen. I knew this was absolutely going to happen."

In the meantime, White just returned from a trip to England and Martin Neary, the former organist and master of choristers at Westminster Abbey, has been in Battle Creek and will return in November to coordinate the music they will sing.

And they will be singing a lot.

The plan is for the choir to sing in daily services as well as evensongs, or prayers set to music.

"It's pretty popular for American choirs to fill in for the English choirs over the summer," White said. "It's going to be a workload for us. This is a pretty big honor and we have our work cut out for us."

White said St. Thomas is the first choir from the 53-parish Diocese of Western Michigan to be invited to perform at the cathedrals.

The real preparation begins next month, he said, when the choir returns from a summer break. Along the way the choir, which sings every weekend at church services, will hold its tradition Christmas and Easter performances and will likely do more public appearances. There are also numerous fundraisers planned to help raise the \$60,000 needed to fund the trip.

"We want to get out in the community a little more," White said. "Now the pressure's on."

Each choir member is responsible for raising funds but some have already said they will help pay for others to make the trip.

White said there will long days and long nights of practice for what many in the choir are viewing as the opportunity of a lifetime.

"It will be a lot of work," Stark said. "But that's part of the fun."

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Want to help?

For information about the St. Thomas Choir trip to England next August or to donate, contact Stephen White at 269-965-2244 or email him at steve@StThomasBBC.org.