

Choir Concert Cancellation FAQ

What was the concert planned?

*Director of Music Weicheng Zhao had a well-intentioned concept for a concert that would center music from the black tradition, called “Songs of Freedom: A Joyous Celebration of Spirituals and Gospel Music.”

What was the response when the concert was advertised?

Most of the All Saints community responded either positively or not at all. However, several parishioners approached clergy with strong objections specifically to the spirituals and slave songs included in the program.

What was the nature of the pain that was expressed?

There was a variety of pain expressed by those coming forward, however the primary pain named was that by singing these songs, All Saints was proclaiming a unity that, though aspirational, doesn't yet exist. It was expressed what was especially painful is the amount of resistance they continually experienced from the congregation to understanding the black experience (both historical and current), and their desire to have the black musical, liturgical and iconographic expressions embraced as part of the mainstream of All Saints Church.

Was it just a few people?

Initially, yes. And because the pain expressed was so intense, a wider group of impacted parishioners – including choir members -- was invited to be part of a listening session for everyone to express their views about the songs and the concert.

What happened at that meeting?

A wide range of opinions were expressed ... from people who thought the concert was fine and it would be bad to change the program in any way to people who thought it absolutely should be cancelled with some in the middle. The vast majority of the people present thought that something needed to be done to address the pain that some people were feeling.... and that the concert could not go on just as planned.

What happened next?

Notes from the meeting were shared with the rector and he agreed the next step was to bring the senior warden, the director of music and the associate rector for justice and community organizing into the conversation. A second

conversation was convened last Monday where a smaller group was present but still representative of the range of views from the first one. Once again, the meeting lasted more than two hours. It included three current vestry members, one former vestry member and two former church wardens. Once again, the vast majority of people in the meeting agreed that something needed to be done and the concert could not just go on as planned or should be canceled.

After consultation with the associate rectors, wardens and director of music, the rector asked the director of music to replace the portion of the concert that included spirituals and slave songs with other music that could be prepared in time, if possible, or if not to shorten the concert. If neither option was feasible, the concert would need to be postponed or canceled.

What was the vestry's role in this?

The rector shared all the above process as well and his decision with his scriptural rationale for it with the vestry on Tuesday, May 21.

How and why was the concert canceled?

The Director of Music presented two additional proposals, one of which included an African-American soloist singing spirituals. The rector, after consultation with members of the Racial Justice Advisory Board and the Racial Justice Ministry, let the Director of Music know that while part of the additional suggestions, which did not include music from the spirituals/slave song genre was acceptable, the continued inclusion of the spirituals/slave songs did not address the core issues of pain that were of primary concern. With only 10 days remaining, and believing that shortening the concert was not an acceptable alternative, the Director of Music believed there wasn't enough time to create a new repertoire. Consequently, for both pastoral and musical reasons, the Director of Music decided to cancel the concert.

Why are these songs a problem? Haven't we sung them before at All Saints?

These are songs that our choir has sung before. And what we heard from a significant number of parishioners was either that they had expressed this opinion before and it had not been heeded or that they hadn't felt safe expressing this view.

Does this mean that songs can only be sung by the racial or ethnic groups from which they come?

Not at all. It does mean that especially when music or other creations come from the pain of a difficult lived experience of a marginalized group, there needs to be at the very least a commitment to understanding not only that

history but the present impact of that history and the varied impact the music might have. And in order to have that understanding of impact, there needs to be wider and more robust conversations and listening that center the voices of groups from whose culture the music is derived. This is because they are uniquely the most impacted by the performance of the genre.

A key point of misunderstanding here is whether it matters that the songs themselves are sung by members of the marginalized group. That is not the issue. The issue and pain point is the choir and congregation – not the individual singer's – engagement with the trauma from which the songs come and the ongoing lived experience of the marginalized community who claim these songs as their heritage.

Does this mean that certain songs or types of songs have been banned at All Saints Church.

Not at all. In accordance with our core value of joyful spirituality, we recognize that this concert and this musical genre is causing significant pain rather than joy, and we practice courageous justice until this is something we can do as joyful spirituality.

What are the next steps of healing?

We are currently working with both our own Racial Justice Advisory Board and Racial Justice Ministry and an outside racial justice organization on the first steps of what will be an extended process of listening, education and healing. As soon as more information is available it will be sent to the congregation by email, web posting and social media.