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Student Life

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High Praise

Gospel choir resurrects an inspired tradition

By Kevin Cool

In Bixler 150 on Sunday afternoons, even in the darkest, dreariest depths of winter, there is plenty of warmth. Show up for a rehearsal by the Colby Gospel Choir and you can expect to see hips swaying, arms waving and hands clapping and to hear voices cascading up and down scales so aggressively it's a wonder the singers all don't have sore ribs. Students, black, brown and white, stand in a semi-circle, shoulders moving rhythmically, piling harmony on top of harmony until the sound reverberates off the walls and spills out the door and down the hall. Joyous and uninhibited—that's the point, says choir member Chera Rodgers '98. "We're singing to the Lord," she said.

The choir, dormant for years, was reconstituted four years ago by Melissa Geathers '97. It originally was an outgrowth of attempts to provide a gospel singing group to perform as part of Martin Luther King Jr. Day celebrations. When the choir re-emerged in 1995 at the annual Carols and Lights concert in Lorimer Chapel, the response was immediate. "People started calling the College and asking us to come and sing at their church," said Angela Crandon '99. "It just took off from there."

The group now appears at several local churches, including an annual festival featuring choirs from throughout Maine. But Carols and Lights remains its signature performance. "That's the one we look forward to each fall," Crandon said. "We don't sing anywhere else until we've done Carols and Lights."

When they performed at the



The Gospel Choir performed at the Martin Luther King Jr. Day celebration January 19

Pleasant Street United Methodist Church in Waterville, the congregation needed a little time to warm up to the music. After a couple of songs, and with some prompting from the group leaders, sporadic clapping began in the pews and grew more enthusiastic with each succeeding number. That is pretty typical, says Crandon. "We try to generate a lot of energy between us because we don't always get a lot of response from the church people, at least right away. They just aren't used to this kind of music."

The enthusiasm and infectiousness of gospel music sets it apart from the solemnity of traditional hymn singing, and local congregations enjoy the change, says Crandon. One of those congregations, the Getchell Street Baptist Church, donated robes for the group. "People here don't get to hear gospel music too often so it's nice to be able to do it for them," Crandon said. "They seem to be appreciative."

The opportunity to sing gos-

pel music is an important cultural outlet for African-American students who may feel cut off from the communities they're familiar with, says Rodgers. "I've been singing this music in church practically since I was born," she said. "It's a part of me that I really missed when I came to Colby."

It's also an expression of faith, says Crandon, who grew up singing in church but wasn't exposed to gospel until she hooked up with the choir during her freshman year. "Sometimes you may not identify with the [worship] services here so you find your own way," she said.

The choir is not strictly the province of African-American students. Several of its members are white, although black students typically provide the direction and musical arrangements. Racial composition is not an issue, Crandon says.

The music is just plain fun to sing, the choir members say. "It has the same improvisational

style that has influenced so much African-American music," said James Harris '98, a four-year member of the choir. "The thing I like about it is that you don't have to sing every note perfectly or even correctly as long as you sing it with confidence."

"It's freedom," said Rodgers. "You're free to express yourself without being so confined by the 'rules' of the composition. It's like coloring a picture without staying inside the lines. It's the same basic picture but you make it your own."

The group's performance helped energize the Martin Luther King Jr. Day celebration January 19. The music seemed particularly appropriate. "For me, personally, it's an honor to be asked to sing at an event honoring Dr. King," Crandon said. "When I, and probably a lot of African-American students, stop to reflect, I realize that there's a chance I wouldn't even be at Colby if it weren't for the work he did." ♦