

Solange De Santis

MinistryMatters, March 2003

Jazz finds a venue with stained-glass windows

By Solange De Santis

At first glance, it just doesn't seem that jazz music and church would fit together. Rev. Bill Carter, an American Presbyterian minister who is also a professional jazz pianist, said one rather reserved parishioner came up to him after a jazz service and said, "That music was wonderful. Why, I almost felt like tapping my foot." On another Sunday, a jazz player failed to show up for his church gig. At coffee hour, Mr. Carter frantically called the man, who groggily explained, "I thought 10 o'clock came at night."

In Canada, some Anglican clergy are passionately dedicated to finding a place in church for the music of Ellington and Brubeck and resources are readily available for those interested in expanding the horizons of their music program. Some bring a jazz trio in for evening vespers, others introduce improvisations during communion or the offertory. Others use syncopated rhythms for a hymn, putting a little swing in their sing.

Last November, the Anglican Foundation's Sacred Arts Trust, which supports dance, music, drama and graphic design in worship, organized a one-day conference called "Sacred Jazz" at St. James Cathedral in Toronto. Mr. Carter, the keynote speaker, had his microphone set up next to a piano and opened with a joyful, swinging piece called "Bye Ya" by Thelonious Monk which, given the name of the composer, Mr. Carter felt was appropriate for church. Jazz, he continued more seriously, belongs in church. While its improvisatory nature threatens some who "prefer to live their religion to a tidy script," it is also a "an act of faith, an informed risk, a willingness to jump into uncharted territory, but with a safety net of grace." Each performance, he explained, is an act of creation.

The Bible is full of music, said Mr. Carter, who is pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Clarks Summit, Pa., and leader of the Presbybop Quartet jazz band. "In 1 and 2 Chronicles, God didn't appear until 120 trumpeters began to blow," he said. For Mr. Carter, Psalm 137, in which the Israelites lament their captivity in Babylon, "is a blues." The Book of Revelation is "a feast for the senses, not a bus schedule," he said. "The church sings its way through Revelation," he added.

While Mr. Carter has had some success integrating jazz with Sunday morning worship, Rev. Tim Elliott, an organizer of "Sacred Jazz" and former rector of Christ Church, Deer Park, in Toronto, said it can be a divisive influence. "Some people just hate jazz and you don't want to alienate people," he said. His advice: don't touch the Sunday service. "On my last Sunday (as rector), we did some jazz stuff, but to try to change the traditional order of service and put jazz into it – no. I thought, 'Let's start with new wine in new bottles,' so we developed jazz vespers on Sunday afternoon," he said.

Improvisation is not unknown even in traditional services, he said. "When the organist fills in as people go up to communion, that's not on the page," he said. Mr. Carter pointed out, at the conference, that jazz was introduced to church in 1965, when Grace Cathedral in San Francisco commissioned a jazz mass. But he also related the story of a woman who stood up in his church as a jazz singer performed, announced, "I will not have a lounge singer croon to me during communion," and left.

Of the four workshops offered at "Sacred Jazz," one involved finding worship resources. John Campbell, organist and music director at Church of the Redeemer, Toronto, organized the workshop along with Douglas Cowling, music director at Church of the Messiah, Toronto. Mr. Campbell, in an interview, said an excellent resource for music ideas is GIA Publications Inc., a Chicago-based publisher of religious music. The company's Web site is www.giamusic.com, he said. "There are psalms set to funkier jazz rhythms and jazz harmonies," he said.

A sacred jazz discography would include Duke Ellington's sacred concerts on the RCA and Fantasy labels, Dave Brubeck's *Light in the Wilderness* on Decca and *La Fiesta de la Posada* on CBS and Joe Williams' *Feel the Spirit* on Telarc. A list of non-traditional music for organ, entitled *Ethnic Resources for Organ*, can be found on the Web site of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, www.wels.net. The list includes *Three Spirituals for Organ in Jazz Styles*, and *Jazz-Influenced Voluntaries*, both by Joe Utterback. Wynton Marsalis and Pat Metheny have also written sacred jazz works.

As for liturgy, Rev. Jim Sandilands, rector of St. James in Dundas, Ont., said he "invented" a jazz vespers service that has been taking place at 4 p.m. on the second Sunday of each month. "We just began by playing jazz, very loose and informal, for half an hour. Then we said a gather prayer and gave thanks for the day and the weather. We said a concluding prayer and a blessing and people went around the corner for munchies," he said.

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St. James' jazz vespers service started last fall and St. Mark's church at Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ont. has asked Mr. Sandilands, who plays bass, to organize a jazz service there once a month. At St. James, the audience is growing. "At the first one we had about 30 people and at the last one we had about 55. One-third to one-half were people who don't normally come to church and aren't normally Anglicans. One guy showed up and drew sketches of us. He said he just liked jazz," said Mr. Sandilands.

One vespers service had a theme. "We played love songs for Valentine's Day and read the passage about love from St. Paul's letter to the Corinthians," he said. Because he is a jazz musician, Mr. Sandilands said the music has "a strong connection with my own spirituality." Improvising, for him, is a symbol that also relates to faith. "Life brings surprises and one has to learn how to be flexible and creative," he said. St. James, he added, is planning for a Sunday jazz mass.

Finding musicians in the community who might be interested in playing in church can be fairly easy, said Mr. Elliott. "You can put the word out, starting with your own director of music. The local high school music teacher is a possibility, as is another church," he said. Local hotels also often have contact numbers for jazz bands who play at functions, he added.

Now retired from Christ Church, Deer Park, Mr. Elliott last fall developed his music ministry into a workshop called *Getting in the Groove: Jazz for Improvising Organizations*. He has both corporate and church customers for the workshops, which can last from one hour to a full day. "We present live jazz music and observe how it happens. There is no written music, but they can play the piece. There is structure but freedom and a musical conversation," he said. Mr. Elliott formed a company, Elliott Resource Services, which also offers vocational consulting, and he said he and his partner may offer a jazz workshop at the next national Anglican house of bishops meeting.

The Sacred Jazz conference so inspired one attendee, Lisa Ilchyshyn, music director of St. Mary Magdalene in Winnipeg, diocese of Rupert's Land, that she went home determined to start a jazz service. "I was so charged up, coming back from the conference that since then, we've had an initial meeting (at the parish) about starting a jazz vespers once a month," she said. She talked to the worship committee and the rector, Rev. Robert Webster, and they are "very keen on the idea," she said. Holy Trinity church in Winnipeg, she said, has held a Christmas jazz concert for the last three years.

Ms. Ilchyshyn attended a jazz vespers service and an evening jazz eucharist service that took place in St. James Cathedral at the end of the Sacred Jazz conference. Mr. Elliott officiated at the vespers service. In his reflection, he noted that there is "a primal rhythm that connects us to creation. Jazz puts us in touch with that time-old rhythm." At the eucharist service, the offertory featured a "participatory happening" at which percussionist Dick Smith pounded out some syncopated patterns on an African bongo drum. After the epistle, old church music met new when organist Christopher Dawes and saxophonist Daniel Rubinoff played a duet called a "musical reflection." Ms. Ilchyshyn was captivated. "It was very intriguing and very moving. I liked the freedom in the service," she said.

Back home in Winnipeg, although the planning for a jazz service is underway, in true improvisational fashion, "where it will lead, we're not sure," she said.

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