

Lifestyle

Christmas concert this weekend

Dunwoody choir returns from tour of European cathedrals, Vatican

By DOT BAKER
Special to the News/Era

The Chancel Choir of Dunwoody United Methodist Church has sung in England, Wales, and Italy, and this Sunday the choir will present the Christmas portion of Handel's *Messiah*.

The program, at 6 p.m. in the sanctuary, will include the "Hallelujah Chorus" and Carelli's *Christmas Concerto* and will feature soloists and a baroque orchestra.

The choir, led by Rick L. Smith,

director of music, performed in England and Wales during tours in 1992 and 1993. It sang at Westminster Abbey and other churches and participated in the Llandaff Music Festival in Wales.

In England, choir members and the music staff explored their Anglican heritage, visiting the sites where Methodism was born.

The past summer's tour of Italy was an opportunity to learn and appreciate Catholic history. Smith said, "The choir got to experience first hand the ancient church and styles of wor-

ship on an intensive level."

Smith explained that primarily they were doing worship services. "It would have been easier to do concerts," he said, "because you don't have to deal with the liturgy of the church, but we particularly wanted the experience of working with the churches in the services."

The tour, arranged by ACFEA, an international firm of tour consultants, included performances in Bergamo, Venice, Padua, Florence, and Rome.

In preparation for the trip, Smith studied Italian so he could communi-

cate with the priests, organists and liturgists. He said, "I couldn't expect them to speak to me in English. I studied enough that they appreciated the effort."

When Smith and his wife, Grace, made a pre-tour inspection trip to Italy in April to work out details, Smith said, "It gave me a real opportunity to struggle with the language." He was assisted by an interpreter provided by ACFEA.

Choir members attended classes on the Italian language, mores, and manners, given by Dr. Paola Terry, and added Gregorian chants to their extensive repertoire.

Sixty-three were in the Dunwoody group that boarded the Delta plane for Italy on June 23 - among them 45 choir members and 18 spouses and friends. Their 10-day adventure began in Milan, where they visited the magnificent Duomo (Cathedral), the LaScala Opera House, and the Dominican monastery housing Leonardo da Vinci's masterpiece, "The Last Supper."

Traveling by double-deck bus, the group's first stop was Bergamo in the foothills of the Alps. The choir performed at an evening Mass, its first experience at singing in one of Italy's cathedrals.

Priests and church officials expressed their appreciation saying, "The seven doors of the church will always be open to you," while taking photographs of the choir in front of the altar.

Two days and three nights were spent in Venice, where the choir sang at the famous Basilica di San Marco, said to be the final resting place of St. Mark's body.

The temperature reached 100 degrees in the cathedral's gallery high, where the choir performed. Smith said, "I was amazed at how the choir rose to the occasion." In spite of the heat and the cramped conditions, the choir members sang beautifully and were rewarded with applause led by one of the priests.



Organist Mary Ruth Solem, front right, and Director Rick Smith, front left, and members of the Chancel Choir of the Dunwoody United Methodist Church.



Dunwoody United Methodist Church's organist Mary Ruth Solem

The singers proved their ability to cope with difficulties at another event, when they sang at a service celebrating the reopening of an ancient church in Padua. The church had not been used in 400 years.

Halfway through Cabena's *Rejoice in the Lord*, the lights went out. They continued singing from memory, with Rick Smith directing and organist Mary Ruth Solem playing by candle glow.

"Mary Ruth is miracle worker," Smith said, referring to her ability to play the organs in the various cathedrals within minutes of being "introduced" to them.

The Padua church is located on the grounds of a military academy and the general presented each choir member with an engraved memento. Dorothy Stipe, who kept a journal of the trip, wrote, too, about a military official who whispered, "Bravo, bravo," during Christa Joy Chase's solo. Chase is assistant director of music and an accomplished vocalist.

Throughout the tour, there were opportunities for the Dunwoody group to sightsee, and in Florence, they enjoyed the statues, fountains and museums. They took side trips to the medieval towns of Siena and San Gimignano. The choir sang during evening Mass in the Baptistry of the

great Renaissance Duomo.

Rome was an appropriate place to end their Italian journey. They were taken on a bus tour of the main historical spots and walked around St. Peter's Square and the Coliseum. They visited the Sistine Chapel and were awed and enthralled by St. Peter's Basilica. Some members of the group were present when the Pope blessed the crowd.

On Sunday morning, July 3, the choir sang at the 11 a.m. Mass in the Basilica. Smith said, "The service was very moving because of the power of that place. Throughout our trip, we were constantly dwelling on the similarities and not the differences of Catholics and Protestants.

"After the Mass, one of the ladies we met asked us where we were from. I said we were a Methodist choir but it was important for us to be there, and she said, 'Well, this is church for everyone.' I thought that was a nice thing for her to say. Obviously, it is the seat of the Catholic Church. But, she realized its significance for all Christendom. That kind of summed up our experience there."

An entry in the official Vatican Records says that "On July 3, 1994, the Chancel Choir of Dunwoody United Methodist Church, Dunwoody, Georgia, USA, sang in the Basilica for the 11 a.m. Mass."