

# Decatur congregation's percussion choir pounds home theme of racial harmony

By Celia Sibley  
STAFF WRITER

The circular Friends Meeting House in Decatur usually is the scene of subdued Quaker services, except when the Thurman Hamer Ellington Percussion Choir is rehearsing or performing.

Then you can feel the beat resonating through the sun-dappled floor.

The drum choir is probably the only church choir in Atlanta that has a music director in dreadlocks performing alongside middle-aged white women pounding drums.

It is the pride of a small multiracial Unitarian Universalist congregation, which holds services at the meeting house each Sunday afternoon. The church's membership is small but growing, with a mailing list of about 200, and is about half white and half black.

The percussion group was founded about a year ago by the Rev. Dan Aldridge Jr., then the church's pastor, and Tony Stringer, the congregation's vice president. Members hope to unify the Decatur community with the uplifting power of sacred African rhythms.

June Sholin, a choir member who joined the church Sunday, is of Scandinavian descent. She told members she wouldn't miss the multicultural experience for anything.

"Everybody originally came from Africa," she mused. "My people left the cave and went north."

Members have learned to use percussion to bring an uncommon grace, drama and spirituality to worship, and, as the

group's reputation has spread, have begun to share their sound with outside groups and at community events.

Within the church fold, the choir has conducted services on African spirituality with African songs and sounds, and has brought dancing, poetry and meditation to the altar, said the church's interim pastor, the Rev. Frances West.

The Thurman Hamer Ellington Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Decatur is named after theologian Howard Thurman, Mississippi civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer and jazz great Duke Ellington. With such a distinguished but unwieldy title, members find it easier to call their congregation THE for short. The choir operates with a grant from the denominationwide Fund for Unitarianism and Universalism.

West is praying that both the congregation and the choir will be successful experiments in ecumenism.

Music director Stone Montgomery has his eyes on the Olympics. By then, he wants the choir to be large in number and polished in performance so that it will exemplify even more impressively how diversity can work in Atlanta.

He said he believes the choir could be the balm to soothe racial division.

"I really would like for the city to go forward and solve this whole issue of people working together, black and white and other persuasions, preferences and lifestyles, and just come together as people and exist in peace and harmony," Montgomery said. "I'm not trying to solve all the problems of world, but hey, this [music] makes people feel good!"



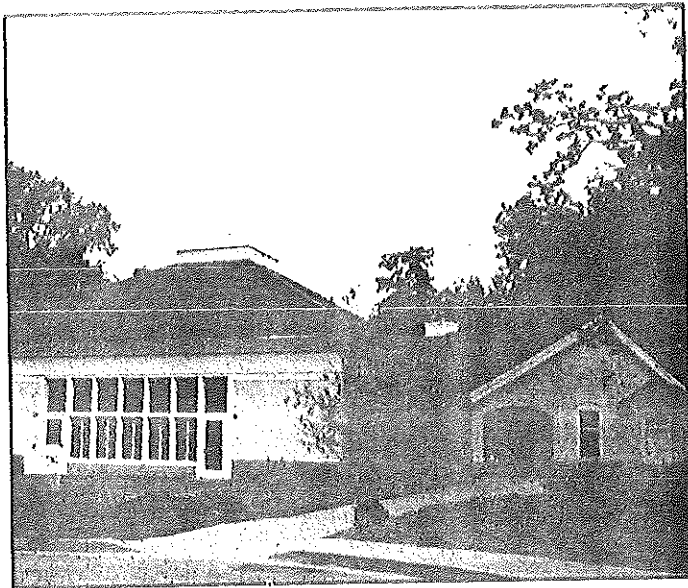
The drum choir is the pride of the Unitarian Universalist congregation.



Photos by JONATHAN NEWTON / Staff

**Uplifting power of African rhythms: Music director Stone Montgomery leads a rehearsal of the Thurman Hamer Ellington Percussion Choir in Decatur.**

## Society of Friends International Auction



The building is new and modern in style, but it houses a unique faith going back over 300 years. Located at 701 Howard Avenue in Decatur, the Society of Friends (Quaker) Meeting House will be the location for an International Auction on December 3, from 6:00 to 9:00 P.M. It is open to all and the money raised will be used for the many projects of the Atlanta Meeting and the Southeastern Regional Office of the American Friends Service Committee, whose offices are located at 92 Piedmont Avenue.

The celebration hopes to raise \$10,000 this year and includes a live and silent auction featuring an automobile, Middle East jewelry, "African treasures", and an oriental carpet, among many other items. There will also be an international feast and markets with Latin American, African-American, and South African gifts. There will also be activities for children including a "swap festival" and entertainment. All this will be at the Meeting House at 701 Howard Avenue (DeKalb Avenue) in Decatur at the corner of Adair Street.

Quakers have been meeting in Atlanta for over fifty years, at first in private homes, then at other sites like the Quaker House on Oakdale Road and Agnes Scott College. Members and those attending meet in silence every Sunday morning (and at certain other scheduled times) with no minister, liturgy, creeds, or ceremonies. The emphasis is on simplicity, togetherness, equality of all individuals, and a personal search for truth within a community of fellow worshippers. At any time during the meeting, individuals may rise to speak very briefly on almost any subject from humorous anecdotes to issues of personal anguish. The meeting ends with handshakes and greetings followed by announcements about the many committees devoted to a wide range of subjects and activities - political, social and recreational.

Always small in numbers (there are only about

197,000 Quakers worldwide) Friends or Quakers have long been noted for their social concerns both in the United States and abroad. Founded in the mid-1600's in England, the Children of the Light were considered a radical group for opposing war and refusing to swear oaths among other things. In nineteenth century America, Quakers were leaders in the anti-slavery movement and the women's suffrage movement. Susan B. Anthony came from a Quaker household. During this century, many Friends became Civil Rights activists in the 1960's. This was especially true in Atlanta, where the Quaker House sponsored integrated seminars led by such individuals as Martin Luther King, Jr. and attempted to improve race relations and smooth the path of integration. Quakers also sponsored day care centers and tutorial programs with integrated groups of college students or staffers. At the same time, the local meeting was working with the anti-Vietnam War groups and helping people obtain conscientious objector status.

Racism, peace, and discrimination against homosexuals or any other group have continued to be primary concerns of local Friends, along with education. The Friends School at the meeting house has 130 students in the first through the fifth grades and a staff of twenty-two. The growth of the school since the current meeting house opened in 1991 has necessitated the use of several trailers for classrooms and a fund raising campaign to construct another building.

As already noted, money raised in the auction and bazaar will go to the local meeting and for the programs of the American Friends Service Committee. The latter organization promotes peace, education and social justice throughout the world. Its programs include bringing together people in the Middle East, helping Latin American refugees gain asylum in the United States, and promoting the peaceful regeneration of a new South Africa. The emphasis of the bazaar/festival/auction, however, will be on entertainment and recreation for Friends, families, children, and any others.

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# New building speaks quietly for Quakers

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It is a gathering of light and silence. Atlanta Friends Meeting, the local congregation of Quakers, now holds its Sunday morning services in a simple, luminous building in Decatur. The building is, in a very Quakerish way, a direct expression of the 200 or so people who gather within.

Before it was completed in August 1991, members met weekly with the architect for about a year, making decisions with a careful, voteless consensus that Quakers call "the corporate inner light."

The building was put on top of a MARTA line.

Perry Treadwell, the clerk of the Meeting during this time, jokes that these Quakers aren't sure when they're quaking whether it's the spirit or a MARTA train.

In truth, Friends don't quake, but sit in silence for most of the appointed hour, sometimes rising to speak at the promptings of something unseen. The meeting house is vacant of outward symbols. It has no staff and no pastor.

This month, Atlanta Friends Meeting celebrated its 50th anniversary.

The first meeting was Feb. 7, 1943, at a Downtown Atlanta YMCA. An Austrian refugee and his teacher at Georgia Tech organized the meeting, which featured an Agnes Scott College professor and Quaker named George Hayes speaking on the inner light.

In 1959, the Meeting moved into a Tudor mansion in Druid Hills, which in the '60s served as a harbor of refuge for civil rights gatherings. The Meeting outgrew these quarters and left in 1989.

This history comes from Elizabeth W. Hendricks, who joined the meeting in 1947 when she arrived from Philadelphia, not a birthright Quaker but what they call a "convinced" one, or convert. Few adults here are birthright Quakers, she notes. As ardent abolitionists, Friends avoided the South in the antebellum period.

The Society of Friends is historically Christian, and many followers are Bible scholars, Mrs. Hendricks says, but there is no attempt to proselytize. Their belief, she says, is in "that of God in every person."

— Doug Cumming