

Jazzing up the church

Swinging liturgy celebrates *lite* of Christ

By thel' Willi.m .. "

Going to church to dig some jazz might sound sacrilegious, but the Worcester County Ecumenical Council, in offering an inspirational program entitled "Celebrating the Life of Christ: A Jazz Liturgy" invites you to do just that.

Presented at 8 p.m. Sunday, May 21, at St. Mary of the Hills Church in Boylston,

Music

this special ecumenical service will depict the life and ministry of Jesus Christ in scripture with musical accompaniment supplied by the Worcester County Gospel Choir under the direction of Myran Brass and a jazz ensemble led by trumpeter Chuck Stevenson.

It was Stevenson who helped to develop the idea for the unique service.

"I belong to the Trinitarian Congregational Church here in Concord and the Rev. John Lombard, who is our new senior minister, knew that I had an interest in jazz music," Stevenson said, speaking by phone from his home. "He said, 'Isn't there something that we could do to combine jazz music with a church service?' "I said, 'Yeah, but just to play a little jazz in church doesn't seem very meaningful to me.'

"Instead of just playing a little jazz music in church, this is an attempt to have the music follow the scripture - depicting major events in Christ's life."

A veteran of the Charlie Barnet Orchestra and one of the founders of the world-famous Preservation Hall in New Orleans, Stevenson has a musical career that dates back some 50 years. He organized the liturgy program's music, while the Rev. Lombard searched for scriptures.

"Steve Dale, who teaches harmony at Berklee and is a pianist and an arranger, played a major role in developing this thing," Stevenson added. "He put a lot of time into this thing. The pieces were written by someone else, but the arrangements are his."

Besides trumpeter Stevenson and pianist Dale, the other musicians are saxophonist Bob Hares, trombonist Ken Wenzel, bassist John Repucci and drummer Reid Jorgensen. With the exception of Wenzel and Stevenson, all are teachers at Berklee College of Music.

Rather than presenting all-instrumental music programs, the solos are combined with the vocal music of popular songwriter Harold Arlen, jazz composers Duke Ellington, Horace Silver and Thad Jones, as well as traditional American spirituals.

"They all relate to passages of scripture," Stevenson said of the music chosen for the program. "Certainly, 'A Child is Born,' by Thad Jones is the nativity. 'The Preacher', of course, relates to Christ as the teacher. And 'St. James Infirmary Blues,' which is a poignantly sad piece, relates to the crucifixion. The resurrection is 'Get Happy.' "

Other works to be heard are Ellington's "[Let a Song Go out of My Heart" and "Come Sunday," Coslow and Harling's "Sing, You Sinners," and two traditionals, "Just a Closer Walk With Thee" and "When the Saints Go Marching In."

The scriptures will be read by members of the ecumenical council, an organization made up of 168 churches in Worcester County.

"Celebrating the Life of Christ: A Jazz Liturgy" was first presented the Sunday after Easter, and if truth be told, Stevenson did not know what to expect.

"Concord is not the kind of community that you would expect to take to swinging with jazz, particularly in our old-line Protestant denomination church," he said, chuckling. "This is not a congregation that is used to jazz music, by and large."

To Stevenson's joyful surprise, the program was not only a success, but just a beginning.

"We've had requests from several other churches to put this on," he said. "As a matter of fact, the same week we are doing it in Boylston, the same service is going to be put on at the cathedral in San Jose, Costa Rica, by a group from Berklee."

SOWlds like jazz in church may be an inspirational idea after all.

"The most satisfying thing to me was it really reached the congregation," Stevenson said. "The whole impact of the scripture and the music, I think, really grabbed them."