



BAPTIST PRESS

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**Nixon Greets Choir Which Sang
For Republicans, Democrats**

MIAMI BEACH (BP)--President Richard M. Nixon moved among members of a Baptist choir at the Miami International Airport to thank them for singing at the GOP "airport mini-convention" and for their promises to pray for him.

At the invitation of the White House staff the musical group sang during the Republican red-carpet ceremonies, welcoming President Nixon, Vice President Spiro Agnew, and their families.

But the choir stoutly maintains political non-partisanship. The group also sang daily for the Democratic National Convention.

The New Directions, an inter-racial, inter-denominational, religious-patriotic choir is sponsored by Riverside Baptist Church of Miami.

The group's 13-piece band played "Hail to the Chief" as the Presidential party debarked from their aircraft. The 132-voice choir then sang as the President moved to a special platform to speak briefly to the crowd.

The President spent several minutes afterwards moving among the youthful musicians.

Jack Day, director of the group, said that Nixon responded warmly to numerous statements from the young people that they were praying for him.

During the Democratic convention The New Directions sang daily to the 25,000 delegates, press corps, and convention officials, plus a television audience estimated at 200 million.

One of the obvious moments of harmony during the sometimes stormy Democratic convention was the standing ovation the crowd gave the choir after it concluded a rousing performance of the song, "I Am Thankful to be An American."

An invitation to sing each night for the GOP convention drew this response from Day, "We're just not able to stand the physical strain of singing every day for the Republican convention like we did for the Democratic convention." They sang for the airport ceremonies for Nixon instead.

The youth group includes Jewish, Catholic, Methodist and several other denominations as well as Baptists, ranging in age from 12 to 27.

Musical accompaniment is by amplified guitars, organ, drums, saxophones, trumpets and trombones.

This is the first time such a musical group has performed before both national political conventions in one year.

Asked by Baptist Press reporter Dana Driver how he arranged to perform before the Democratic convention, Day replied: "We took the idea to local Democratic leaders and then went all the way to the top in Washington.

"Many of the local leaders thought it was a good idea," he continued, "until they heard it was sponsored by a church. A smoke screen seemed to go up then.

"We were referred to Dick Murphy, entertainment coordinator for the Democratic convention in Washington, but I thought the idea was lost before contacting him," Day recalled. "But when I talked to him, his word spilled out with irony.

"He said he wanted a youth group dressed in red, white and blue to provide some entertainment," Day related. "Well, our group's colors were already red, white and blue and we had a young sound."

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The invitation to sing at the conventions prompted some feelings of envy and even jealousy among some professional entertainers, Day admitted. "Talent agents stood in line to get their artists into these conventions, and they were disappointed to see an amateur group appear."

But even the skeptics changed their minds after hearing the group, he pointed out. One orchestra leader, skeptical of the group at first, came up to Day after the Democratic convention and said, "Unbelievable, magnificent, very professionally done!" Day said.

Robert S. Denny, general secretary of the Baptist World Alliance, with headquarters in Washington, D. C., delivered the invocation at the Tuesday evening session of the Republican convention. He prayed for peace--"in individual hearts, in our communities, and our cities, and among nations."

The New Directions, not to be confused with another group by the same name from Burlington, N. C., which was also present at the Democratic Convention during a confrontation with Yippies at Flamingo Park, was organized in February of 1970 by the Riverside church.

"Emmit Roy, pastor of Riverside Baptist, and I wanted to design a program that would turn kids on," Day explained. "So we started organizing a singing group at the church."

With 12 charter members, the group grew to 65 members in six months, and soon expanded to include those of other denominations.

Alina Novo, 14, a Catholic, explained her relationship to the group, saying: "This is great fun, and the kids are even greater. A friend at Riverside Baptist asked me to come to a rehearsal. . . . I liked what I saw and heard, and joined."

"I have Jesus now," she continued, "like never before. I didn't dig religion before, but now I do. We are all brothers and sisters."

Izahel Mont-Ros, 19, a student at Dade Junior College and another Catholic member of the choir, said he had been in a lot of groups before, "but nothing to match what this one has." The saxophonist who doubles on clarinet said there are never any religious problems in the group.

"Our horn section has a prayer session before each performance," he related. "One guy is Jewish, and he leads in prayer also."

Attractive Ruth Nielson, 18, a converted Jew, declared that "the Lord led me to this group."

"When I came to Riverside Baptist," she explained, "I got involved immediately with the choir. It's been a great experience."

"We've had great chances to witness to delegates and others," Ruth said. Asked if she would campaign for any candidate, she replied: "No, I'm just campaigning for Jesus Christ."

"Singing with the group has been a great addition to my Christian experience," added John Doyle, 21. "It's taught me to say, 'I love you, brother,' without feeling embarrassed."

Tom Smith, 23, one of the 12 charter members of the group, added that there is a "special love in the group and I like being part of it. Although I'm one of the older members, it's good to interact with the young ones," he said.

Day recalled remarks by Murphy, the Democrat's entertainment coordinator, after the convention. He told us, "Those young people, because of their obvious religious beliefs, were one of the convention's highlights. People were used to seeing radical youth in demonstrations. It was a refreshing experience."

"We want the nation to get to know our kind of kids, and what they stand for," Day concluded. "Our motto is, 'Better ways for better living through Jesus Christ.'"

The attitude of The New Directions, as described by the director, is exemplified in the three songs the group sang to the Presidential party and the crowd at the airport: "I'm Thankful to Be An American," "Love Can Work a Miracle," and "Contagious."

(Photo mailed to Baptist state editors)



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