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TRIED STONE YOUNG ADULT CHOIR RECEIVES WCU'S MOUNTAIN HERITAGE AWARD FOR 2001

CULLOWHEE – The Young Adult Choir of Asheville's Tried Stone Missionary Baptist Church, a vocal group that has carried on the tradition of African-American gospel music in the mountains for more than 40 years, is the recipient of Western Carolina University's Mountain Heritage Award for 2001.

Choir Director Cornell Proctor accepted the award on the choir's behalf at the 27th annual Mountain Heritage Day, held Saturday (Sept. 29) at WCU. The award was presented by Richard J. Collings, Western's vice chancellor for academic affairs.

For the past four decades, members of the Tried Stone Young Adult Choir have served as traveling musical ambassadors, touring around the country singing for various denominations, dignitaries, political conventions and church anniversaries. The choir also has been a featured group over the years on the Traditional Music Stage at Mountain Heritage Day.

Proctor has led the choir since its inception and serves as the group's keyboardist, along with Terry Letman. The choir specializes in "down-home, hard-driving gospel music," said Proctor, who also directs Tried Stone's Senior Choir, which is 50 years old, and the church's decades-old Junior Choir.

Through the years, music has been a constant at Tried Stone Church, even as the congregation has moved several times around Asheville. In 1993, a fire destroyed the sanctuary on Carroll Street, but the congregation and choirs keep going strong under the leadership of Elder Alfred Blount, church pastor.

David Brose, a folklorist at the John C. Campbell Folk School in Brasstown, said gospel music, as it is presented today in black churches around Western North Carolina, has been developing for 80 to 100 years.

Before gospel music, the African-American tradition of singing "spirituals" developed among the slave population in the early- to mid-19th century, said Brose, who has researched extensively both black and white sacred

music traditions in the mountains.

"The black sacred songs known as spirituals, which were considered new in the early 19th century, were much more lively and interesting than hymns, and were quickly dominating the music of black Americans," Brose said.

"As time passed, the spiritual song form became even more secularized, and took on double meaning, as blacks would sing about enslavement, freedom from enslavement through escape, and the miserable work conditions within the lyrics of the spiritual songs," he said.

In the later 19th century, thousands of freed African-Americans moved north in search of better opportunities. By then, a singing system called "lining out," in which the song leader sang the lyrics one line at a time with the choir repeating the line, and the tradition of spirituals, seemed old-fashioned. By the early 20th century, the old hymns and spirituals were largely replaced by gospel music.

"Although spirituals had been based on oral folksong forms, gospel music was based on folk songs, as well as popular music and the sounds from 'tin pan alley.' By the early 20th century, black gospel was being composed by Charles Albert Tindley, Lucie Elizabeth Campbell and Thomas Andrew Dorsey," Brose said.

"Today, gospel music continues to mix the sacred and the secular. Sacred lyrics are placed over music which is contemporary, secular, exciting and dynamic," he said.

In the beginnings of gospel music, the piano was often the only musical instrument used, but as the 20th century progressed, other instruments such as drums, brass and electric guitars became common in African-American churches.

Although one can still hear the older traditions of "lining out" and spirituals in black churches in the Southern Appalachians, those traditions are becoming less common, Brose said. "Gospel music is the norm, with much freedom of structure and arrangements that combine sacred lyrics with secular melodies and performance styles from the popular music of the radio and television."

The Young Adult Choir of Tried Stone Missionary Baptist Church is the 26th recipient of WCU's Mountain Heritage Award. The award is given in recognition of outstanding contributions to the preservation or interpretation of the history and culture of Southern Appalachia; or in recognition of outstanding contributions to research on, or

interpretation of, Southern Appalachian issues. Award winners are chosen by a special committee.