

The Road to a Funeral

by Dan Adler

This past Monday, eleven of us from Heart of the City led worship for Nancy Ellis's (one of our African American singers) father at an African American Methodist Church in St. Paul. The sanctuary and overflow room was packed with a 99% African American congregation. Our group crammed together on a corner of the stage with no monitors and sang and played our hearts out. It was a beautiful funeral celebration of this man's life and legacy. Afterwards, Nancy sent us all an email saying that she had received so much positive feedback about our ministry at that day. She even had people ask her if we would sing for their funerals too. She said that church had never experienced anything like we did and that we changed this particular church forever by our presence and ministry there. What encouraging feedback to receive from singing at a funeral! What an honor to be there!

I've been thinking about that day a lot and as I've thought of it, for me it has been a sort of pinnacle in this ministry. Funerals are vulnerable experiences. Funerals are intimate and they're gatherings for family and friends. And here we were... So as I've pondered this particular funeral and those of us who worked together to lead worship that day, I've marveled at the road that brought us there and the implications of it. Let me inspire you with this story.

I worked as the Music Minister at Church of the Open Door in the Twin Cities from 1985 to 1996. In 1994, while still at Open Door, I was brought on staff with Promisekeepers part time. Feeling a burden rise up within us about the racial and denominational divisions in the Church, in 1996, Sandy and I felt called to leave my position at Open Door and step out in faith to try to use our gifts of leadership and music to bring the church together in gatherings of worship without starting a new church. So we began Heart of the City Ministries. I had about 150 different singers and instrumentalists involved in worship teams at Open Door at that time. They were all Caucasian – as was our church. So as we launched out into this ministry of racial reconciliation and Biblical unity, we knew we had to make the band that was going to lead this ministry a multi-racial band if we were going to succeed in bringing the races together. So we began that daunting task by networking with the very few people we knew of other racial backgrounds.

Two Caucasian musicians that had been in our worship ministry at Open Door for years were Mike Oxley, who plays electric guitar and Stephan Roufs who plays keyboards. Stephan happened to have grown up in North Minneapolis with a great African American vocalist. So he recommended that we contact her when we started this ministry. Her name is Nancy Ellis and she has been singing with us since our first event. On Monday, Nancy sang with us at her father's funeral. When we began this ministry, Stephan continued with us as one of our main keyboard players and Mike has filled in over the years as our electric guitar sub when our African American guitarist, George Parrish can't make it. Ten years later, on Monday, Mike and Stephan played their instruments at Nancy's father's funeral.

While doing one Promisekeeper event in the Twin Cities, I met an African American sax player named Troy Williams who expressed interest in playing with the new ministry we started called Heart of the City. Troy also happened to grow up with Nancy and was introduced to BB King music by Nancy's father. Troy has been playing sax with HOTC for several years now and on Monday, Troy played sax with us at Nancy's father's funeral.

While doing another PK event at Bloomington Assembly of God, I met an amazing Chinese keyboard player named Peter Shu. He also expressed interest in being a part of this new Heart of the City ministry that Sandy and I were starting. It took several years before he became involved, but Peter's been playing with us for many years now and on Monday, this Chinese guy was playing a mean Gospel B-3 organ at Nancy's father's funeral. (*Nancy likes to call him "Blackanese" because he's so good at Black Gospel music*).

Also, through Promisekeepers, I met a Hispanic singer named Ed Adorno who began to sing with us. He told me about an African American guy that I should check out named Rick Murphy. Rick has been singing with us for years now and on Monday, Rick was singing at Nancy's father's funeral.

A few years into our ministry, an East Indian woman named Johanna Macden contacted us and expressed interest in singing with us. Johanna sang for several years with us and then moved to Nashville. So then her sister, Susanna began to sing with us. She sang with us for several years but then got married and moved to Madison, Wisconsin right after recording Resurrection Chant. But she knew another East Indian young woman who was interested in singing with us that she recommended. So Jessica Singh, formerly from the Sikh religion, has been singing with us ever since. On Monday, Jessica joined our voices at Nancy's father's funeral.

One year, we held a HOTC Worship Celebration at another African American Church in St. Paul. At that event, an African American woman who attended that congregation named Barbra Van Leer sang a solo during the offering. She later told us that her heart resonated with our ministry and that she would love to sing with us. Several months later, we had an opening and she began to be one of our regular vocalists. On Monday, Barbra raised her voice with us at Nancy's father's funeral.

Our drummer that day was a wonderful Caucasian college student that Peter Shu works with at North Central University named Gabe Hagen who has played with us at several events recently. And our bass player named Justin Reicken, is another Caucasian that Peter knows who teaches guitar lessons in the area. On Monday, Justin and Gabe were playing for Nancy's dad's funeral.

On that Monday, all of these diverse paths merged together on a road that led to an African American funeral. Some of us had to make radical life changes and step out in faith to get on this road. Others had to embrace a vision and join it, others had to bring a friend and others had to trust a friend's invitation. But all of us ended up leading worship

at this African American funeral that most of us wouldn't have been a part of if we hadn't already intentionally come together in love and community and a joint mission in the past. And this is the story of just 11 of us in this group that now involves more than 30 people – each with their own unique story! To me, in a strange way, this funeral was a milestone of our vision. We have become family with each other. We've gained enough trust and love to be invited to lead worship at an African American funeral. And we weren't just there, but we were able to make a significant contribution. Eleven years ago, I had some big hopes, visions and ideals for this ministry – many of which haven't come to fruition. But I never imagined the road leading to a funeral like this, in a church like this, leading worship with people like this who share such love and community and support for one another. What an honor! This road has taken us a long way and has brought many of us together. And it holds great promise for where it will lead in the future and who will walk it with us. What a blessed road it is, and how beautiful to walk it together. We invite you to join us in walking this road of Biblical unity with intentionality. Most people don't stumble on it by accident, you've got to make an effort to get there and the road is often rocky and uphill. But it leads to beautiful places and I believe it's the way of the Savior.