

Veteran minister reflects on losses in African-American church life

April 26, 2012

BELTON—After more than five decades of ministry, George Harrison understands what African-American Christians have gained and lost in the last half-century.



Black church music chronicles the African-American experience, and veteran minister George Harrison wants to see that heritage preserved and passed along to the next generation.

Harrison, pastor emeritus of First Baptist Church-NBC in Waco and a veteran church musician, vividly remembers life in segregated Central Texas. Growing up in Belton, he recalled how a society where whites and blacks existed in separate spheres that rarely intersected severely restricted his view of reality.

"Even though I could see beyond my community, it was like I was wearing blinders," he said.

The end of Jim Crow laws opened up opportunities for African-American advancement—and for whites to benefit from the contributions of black Americans, he noted.

"Desegregation was good for the nation. ... Desegregation had great value in terms of opening up opportunities to learn about other cultures," he said.

Even so, Harrison acknowledged, segregation created a unified—albeit restricted—black community with the church at its center.

"There was a richness in the close-knit community," he said. "You can't gain without losing. You can't lose without gaining."

In a closed, segregated society, Harrison got an early start in ministry as a church musician and composer. He began playing the piano at age 3 and wrote his first song, "Flowers in the Spring," at age 6. After he taught the song to the other children at Macedonia Baptist Church in Belton, where his father was chairman of deacons, the church called him to direct the children's choir and begin leading music in worship. At age 12, he began preaching.

Without question, Harrison recognizes he gained personally from the changes that occurred as a result of the Civil Rights Movement. He earned his undergraduate degree at the [University of Mary Hardin-Baylor](#), where he directed the premiere choral group and traveled extensively as a student recruiter.

After graduation, he worked several years in a post with a railroad company that allowed him to enter a master's degree-equivalency program before pursuing further graduate courses at [Baylor University](#) and Southwest Texas State University.

He also served as pastor of churches in Temple, Gatesville and Lampasas, as well as Macedonia Baptist Church in Belton. In 1987, he became pastor of First Baptist Church-NBC in Waco.

About that same time, he was named director of cultural affairs at Baylor University and the first director of Heavenly Voices, the university's Black Gospel choir.

He went on to serve in several administration posts at Baylor. In 2003, Harrison returned to UMHB, first as director of community services and cultural affairs and later as director of digital media services.

Through it all, Harrison has maintained his love for music—particularly music distinctive to the African-American church. And he has made it his mission to help preserve that musical heritage.

Harrison produces a local radio program, "Gospel Now." He also leads occasional seminars that explore the meaning of Spirituals dating back to days of slavery, as well as more recent Black Gospel songs.

"There is a rich culture in those songs, and it's endangered. There's a richness in our worship, and the new generation has no idea about it," he said.

Even so, Harrison hopes the black church can regain its central role in the lives of African-Americans and recapture its ability to instill a clear sense of identity in young people. And he wants to teach the rising generation of black church leaders—as well as anyone else who will listen—about the history chronicled in African-American church music.

"The music tells the story," he said.