

Wichita Falls church takes fine arts festival to St. Kitts

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WICHITA FALLS—Church musicians from [First Church in Wichita Falls](#) recently orchestrated the first Christian Fine Arts Festival on the island nation of St. Kitts.

Kelly Lowe works on maintenance of handbells that First Baptist Church in Wichita Falls donated to Antioch Baptist Church in Basseterre, St. Kitts.

More than 50 members of the church's choir and orchestra traveled to the Eastern Caribbean to conduct the festival and related music missions projects.

A plea from Michael Penny, a St. Kitts native who attended First Baptist while a student at Midwestern State University, sparked their involvement.

Now a national security officer in St. Kitts, Penny lamented the growth of gangs and a rise in crime among young people, and he longed for a way to involve youth in more worthwhile pursuits. He asked Minister of Music Michael Smith to consider a trip to his homeland to start a youth orchestra.

Penny already had contacted the pastor at Antioch Baptist Church in Basseterre, St. Kitts, and that congregation was ready to participate in the venture.

A week later, Pastor Bob McCartney at First Baptist received an e-mail from the mother of a current Midwestern student asking McCartney to consider a trip to the island to preach and lead a sports camp.



Elton Milford (center) and Kim Farris (left) offer beginning trumpet instruction to young people on St. Kitts.

Contact by two people about two separate ministries for the same place got the attention of McCartney and Smith.

"When we shared that with each other, it became a point of prayer and consideration of doing something that perhaps God had initiated," Smith said.

In consultation with Pastor Lincoln Connor of the St. Kitts church, leaders at First Baptist developed a plan and strategy.

"Not only would we simply send them some instruments, but we would have several tracks going at the same time," Smith said. "We added a complete palette of offerings and teaching opportunities, combined with national visibility, to help break down barriers and open doors for Antioch Baptist Church."



Maddison Baird from First Baptist Church in Wichita Falls teaches techniques to praise dancers on St. Kitts. (PHOTOS/Courtesy of First Baptist Church in Wichita Falls)

Organizers scheduled the fine arts festival and related events to coincide with the church's Vacation Bible School, a highlight for the island each summer that attracts about 500 children.

The Texas church collected 40 band instruments—from bass drums to flutes—to ship to St. Kitts, along with orchestrations and music stands.

In addition, Dean Savage, associate minister of music at First Baptist Church, organized a clinic for the St. Kitts and Nevis Defense Force Band, the nation's only orchestra.

The Texans also led classes to teach new musicians of all ages how to play their instruments, "some of whom had never seen some of these instruments up close before," Smith said.

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Tracy Duff, a member of the choir at First Baptist Church in Wichita Falls, enjoys time with children of St. Kitts during a recent music missions trip to the island nation.

Singers from all over the island were invited to join a choral festival, and 115 local singers participated in a mass choir with the Texans. The Wichita Falls team donated new choir folders and anthems to the Antioch church.

The group organized a children's chorus under the direction of Stasha Savage, First Baptist's Kid Praise coordinator.

First Baptist Church donated a four-octave set of handbells to Antioch Church, and Casey Oliver conducted a clinic in which he taught 25 local people handbell-ringing techniques.

The church group also helped organize the nation's first ballet troupe. Volunteers offered free ballet lessons to children all over the island and gave more than 200 free tutus to girls who participated.

Ninety people also participated in a praise dance clinic for dancers at Antioch and other churches.

In addition to the fine arts, the church group also practiced the art of service.

"While all the other tracks were taking place, choir members and a painting crew was organized to paint the courtyard of the William Connor Primary School, not far from Antioch Baptist Church as a gesture to the community that 'Antioch cares ... God cares,'" Smith said.

The Texas church had shipped the paint and supplies to the island, and the painting continued even after the First Baptist team returned home. This was the first paint the school had received in more than 20 years, Smith said.



Linda Cassidy from First Baptist Church in Wichita Falls teaches a girl from St. Kitts the basics of playing a flute.

The school was the site of Rock St. Kitts, a concert aimed at reaching the youth of the island through Christian music and a gospel message.

The Texas team also helped organized a sports camp to teach basketball, soccer and rodeo roping. Volunteers also installed metal basketball nets for the school.

A contemporary concert in a park also was held to reach out the community.

The week culminated with the first national Christian arts festival, held on the lawn of the Government House, the chief seat of government for the nation, with the governor, the prime minister and more than 1,000 others

present as the newly formed orchestra, handbells, choirs and dancers performed.

"The experience changed the lives of our people who attended, gave heart to the music we learn each week to lead our people in worship, created a partnership that will continue, and, hopefully, changed the direction of some of the residents of the nation of St. Kitts and Nevis," Smith said.