

Choir guilty as charged

The Black Student Movement has walked in some very shaky spots this year but done as filled with tension as the ground covered during the budget hearings conducted by the Campus Governing Council earlier this month.

Most of the requested budget passed but not without a lot of controversy and criticism.

The biggest controversies centered around the CGC's interpretation of a bill in the constitution of Student Government which prohibits the funding of groups which have a "political or religious nature."

Some council members accused the BSM of being political and religious although, when pressed by BSM Chairperson Wende Watson, the council could not offer a structured definition of either term.

The council's inability to provide a guideline for what constitutes a political or religious nature was the hitch that saved much of the BSM's budget request. When conservatives on the council tried to apply the clause to the newly formed Political Committee and the Gospel choir they failed to provide definitive criterions to substantiate reasons for disallowing funding for these activities.

Prepared for a fight

The BSM was prepared to defend the usual perennial issues about funding: Why have a newspaper when a newsletter would suffice and cost much less? Couldn't the BSM have the Black Arts Festival as part of Black History Month and eliminate duplication? Money for a Ball? Isn't that purely social . . .

The Central Committee also knew that debate of the political function of the BSM would surface. But this issue was disposed of by Watson with a simple explanation of the purpose of the committee. The job of the political committee is to organize forums, conduct surveys on issues pertinent to blacks and serve as a liaison between the BSM and Student Government for joint sponsorship of rallies, like the rally protesting Reagan budget cuts in financial aid, Watson said. By linking the committee to Student Government, Watson cleverly removed the issue from debate.

With that hurdle crossed, the BSM faced a higher hurdle in its defense of the Gospel Choir.

An investigation by a subcommittee of the CGC uncovered evidence that undermined the Gospel Choir's indignant protest that it had no religious nature. The evidence included flyers depicting a cross with the slogan, "The sky is the limit" running beneath it and articles from The Phoenix and The Black Ink which quoted some members and officers as saying the choir served as a religious outlet for black christians on this campus to give honor to God.

Added to the condemnation of this printed material was a review of the choir's schedule which revealed that the majority of its engagements were in churches.

Past councils funded the gospel choir because the cultural contribution of the choir outweighed its religious aspect. But with conservatives holding key seats on the council, the BSM was pressured to prove a distinct separation between religion and culture.

Is it culture or is it religion?

There is no doubt that gospel is an intricate part of black culture. It is a musical expression with deep roots in a purely African experience. When slaves were brought to the shore of America and stripped of their language, their tribal ties and numerous other parts of their heritage, the one thing that remained to them was their voices. And these voices rose loud and clear to intone the sufferings of an oppressed people.

But no one, not even members of the CGC, is denying the foundation upon which gospel is built. And no one is asking for a philosophical reason to justify the existence of a gospel choir.

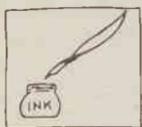
The question being tossed to members and officers of the choir — and ultimately to the leadership of the BSM — is whether this subgroup has a religious nature in actuality, not in theory.

It is a question Chairperson Watson adroitly sidestepped en route to obtaining funding for the choir for the eighth year. The BSM should hold fast to this victory while realizing just how easily it can still break with in our grasp if certain issues are not dealt with immediately.

Guilty As Charged

The time is long overdue for BSM's Central Committee to admit to the general body that the choir has wandered far outside the realms of what a cultural subgroup is to be and that the Gospel Choir and the entire BSM are threatened as long as it continues in its present state.

For any member of the choir to deny the choir has a religious nature is to commit the greatest hypocrisy. In cold hard prose, it would be a lie.



Black Ink

If blackness can be converted into words and pictures, we intend to do it

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Any one can easily gauge the personality of the choir as religious. Many members openly declare their christianity and the ease with which they align their personal beliefs to the purpose of the choir indicates how the choir is perceived.

The uneasy truth is that the choir is religious. There have been too many performances when choir members have turned to the audience and asked for its prayer that God would bless them to continue to sing His praises. Countless times the audience has been invited to clap their hands, stomp their feet and join in with the choir as its members lifted their voices up to God.

Now, that may not be Baptist or Methodist or any other denomination but it smacks of religion nonetheless.

The CGC wasted time debating where the choir sings when it would have been better employed looking religious up in the dictionary. It is not important where the choir sings. Let the choir sing in churches. Let it sing in Memorial Hall or the pit. Let it sing on the steps of the Capitol in Washington D.C. Neither place nor song lends the choir its religious nature. It is the invocation of its members for an audience to acknowledge and praise some type of God.

The powers that be

The BSM did not intend to have the choir become a religious sector when the group was taken under its administrative wings 10 years ago but it must accept responsibility for any problems within the structure of the choir. The BSM has failed to give guidelines for any of the subgroups in the constitution and consequently the subgroups have had to act with some autonomy in shaping their activities.

The Central Committee should not hesitate in proposing constitutional amendments that dispel any doubts as to which organ of the BSM directs policies, then waste no time in asserting its authority. The Central Committee would have been well within its power to issue an ultimatum to the choir to smooth the passage of the budget: either allow the cosmetic change in the name to delete the word gospel or the BSM will hold auditions in the fall for another choir whose focus is not religion.

This course of action is still open to the BSM and should be pursued. The gospel choir's membership may have increased in number and its sound in volume, but the choir has failed to grow culturally. For while gospel is a significant part of black heritage, it is not all of our musical culture.

It may be necessary to embrace other music in black culture just to reaffirm ownership. As Watson pointed out in the finance hearings, whites have taken black music and called it "disco" just as they took cornrolls and called it the "Bo Derek Look." And now they have blue-eyed soul, too.

By tenaciously clinging to gospel as though it were sacrilegious to sing anything else, the choir has limited itself to just one dimension of what is a multi-dimensional musical heritage. For those members who can not accept that black music is not only gospel but also rhythm and blues, jazz, folk and soul, let them join choirs in the United Christian Fellowship, Black Interdenominational Student Association or community churches. There are numerous outlets available to praise God and testify in His behalf without the amen corner taking up residence in the BSM's choir.

That leaves plenty of room for people who are talented enough to sing more than gospel and who simply enjoy singing.

The BSM was lucky this year that none of the CGC members except James Exum and Vince Steele — both black — had seen the choir perform. By taking preventive action now, the BSM will be ready if next year's CGC presents firsthand accounts of the choir's religious nature and a definition of religion that would need more than luck to combat.