The Sacred Power of Spirituals
Talking with the Director of The Spirituals Project Choir

For more than a year, the Saturday Lunch Committee has worked to bring The Spirituals Project Choir to the First Presbyterian Church of Littleton. Their faithfulness and God’s grace has proven successful. This astonishing Choir will perform in our sanctuary on April 27 at 1 p.m.

I recently sat down with the Choir’s director, M. Roger Holland, II, in his office at the Lamont School of Music on the University of Denver campus. A graduate of Union Theological Seminary in New York City where he received his Master of Divinity degree, Roger also served as Artist-in-Residence and director of the Union Gospel Choir for over 13 years. In 2015 Union awarded him the Trailblazer Distinguished Alumni Award, the first given to a graduate whose ministry is music, for his contributions to the legacy of African American music. He received a master’s degree in piano performance from the Manhattan School of Music also in New York, and completed his undergraduate work at Westminster Choir College in Princeton, New Jersey, where he majored in Music Education with concentrations in piano and voice. “Come and hear,” Carol Parsons.

Carol: In my experience, many people, myself included, confuse Spirituals with Gospels or think they are two words for the same music. What’s the difference?

Roger: First of all, they are two separate genres. The music of Spirituals precedes Gospel music. There’s a quote I like to use from the musician and scholar, Wendell Whalum, who wrote that “The Spirituals are the root and trunk of all black music, and really all American music.” Spirituals emerged during the period of slavery in this country and are the convergence of African culture, Christianity, and the social condition of slavery. So, you have enslaved Africans, who brought with them their own culture, their own understanding of the world, and their own musical idioms. Then they were introduced to Christianity, which they understood even though very often the message that was presented to them by their slave owners and missionaries was that slaves should obey their masters and that God had ordained for them to be enslaved. But they did not believe that. They heard the other Bible messages—that God is a deliverer and intercedes on behalf of those who are oppressed and less fortunate.

Carol: Are there recurring themes in the music of Spirituals?

Roger: The main themes have to do with freedom, heaven, and the humanity of people.

Carol: What is the Spirituals Project Choir?

Roger: In 1998, The Spirituals Project was founded by Dr. Arthur C. Jones to preserve and revitalize the music and teachings of the sacred songs called “spirituals”, created and first sung by enslaved Africans in America in the 18th and 19th centuries. The Spirituals Project Choir endeavors to accomplish this through performance and various educational initiatives such as lectures, symposia, and conferences. The Spirituals Project Choir is perhaps the most visible part of The Spirituals Project, as an entity that meets to regularly rehearse and
perform. One may think of The Spirituals Project Choir as the public ambassador for the work of the Project.

Carol: Where do the members of the Spirituals Project Choir come from?
Roger: They come from the community at large. A wide range of people, who are Jewish, Protestant, Catholic, non-denominational, and unaffiliated participate in the choir. They are all ages and from many cultures and ethnicities.

Carol: Why has the music of the Spirituals endured as long as it has?
Roger: This music has a power unto itself. These songs were a great part of why slave communities were able to manage. Creating and singing Spirituals affirmed for them their own humanity. And that power has not diminished through time.

Carol: Can you say more about the community-based aspect of Spirituals?
Roger: It’s not like after working a 12-hour shift in the fields, slaves got together to work on the songs they were going to sing the next day in the fields, saying, “You sing this part, and you sing this part, and you lead.” These melodies had to be easy to catch on to. A person started singing and others joined in and verses came about as people were inspired, responding to real life situations.

Carol: Why did you decide to leave your roots and successes in New York City to come to Denver to teach at the Lamont School of Music and direct The Spirituals Project Choir?
Roger: Again, it is important to distinguish the overall mission of The Spirituals Project, which is achieved through both education and performance. I strongly believe in the work and mission of the Project, and greatly appreciate the diversity of the music that the Choir performs, inclusive of various styles and genres of the African American experience. It’s dual approach of education and performance was attractive to me, myself as a performer and educator.

Carol: What is your hope for The Spirituals Project Choir?
Roger: My hope is that through this ministry, if you will, the music that we do and the mission we have—sharing the story and sharing the music—that people will become cognizant of what this music means; and we can use Spirituals not only for change, but also for healing and reconciliation.