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2005 Finalist Cornell Award

1st Place
AS IT WAS IN THE BEGINNING AH: The OLM sisters are celebrating 175 years of caring for Charleston's sick, poor and needy. But the nuns' ranks are shrinking. What does their future hold?

Sunday, December 26, 2004

God must have heard their prayers. Thunderstorms passed just in time, allowing a cool but sunny day for the nuns' big moment, a Sunday Mass celebrating their 175 years of service.

For all those years, their prayers have been for Charleston, a city whose history is intertwined with their own. They've taught its young, aided its poor and nursed its sick through wars and hurricanes and daily grinds.

On this day, those who still wear the black veils stand out. There are fewer of them. Times have changed.

Today, their house sits down a one-lane drive that winds so far among majestic live oaks that drivers on Fort Johnson Road cannot see it without turning in. Most dare not venture past the "No Trespassing" sign that greets them.

If they did, they'd pass statues of Christ and the Blessed Mother, a trickling waterfall and a tree planted with dirt from all the towns the sisters have served: Charleston, Summerville, Aiken, Greenville, Mauldin, Georgetown, Sumter, Baltimore and Middlesex.

Finally, the simple, tan stucco house.

The 200 people who've gathered under an expansive white tent pull their coats a bit tighter as a crisp wind rips off Charleston Harbor behind them. The dank of a flag pole echoes as the sisters read the names of the 179 deceased nuns of this order, the Sisters of Charity of Our Lady of Mercy. Most just call them the OLMs.

A line of clergy in white forms a procession. "O saints of God, remember us!"

The priests, like the sisters, are mostly gray-haired, many with glasses, a few with the slower stride of age. Bishop Robert Baker walks to the front. He prays that more women will hear God's call to this uniquely Charleston order of nuns.

Retired Bishop David Thompson steps up to give the homily. He knows the sisters well and describes their care for the sick, poor and needy. He knows those needs remain.

"What the world needs now is more OLMs," he says. "We all want you to be Ever Ready batteries. We want you to keep going and going."
Across the harbor rise the spans of the new Cooper River bridge. The city spills far beyond the peninsula in the distance. Times have changed out there. And in here.

Gone are the floor-length black habits. Gone are the rules that once dictated when a sister could leave town or see her family.

And, gone too soon, may be this group of sisters. They once numbered 100. Today, 16 live in this house. In all, there are 23 OLMs.

Girls don’t join the convent like they used to.

WHO WILL CARRY OUT THEIR WORK FOR ANOTHER 175 YEARS? AS IT WAS IN THE BEGINNING

Rush-hour traffic builds with drivers on Folly Road hurrying to work this Thursday morning. Inside the motherhouse, 11 sisters stroll past a ceiling-high statue of the Blessed Mother outside their intimate chapel.

Silence fills the room except for a cough and a creak of a pew.

The world outside has changed, but this Liturgy of the Hours begins as it has since the 3rd century.

“Oh God, come to my assistance …”

There are no instruments, no choir, no frills, only voices of prayer that rise back and forth across the aisle. There aren’t the girlish tones of young women. With a deeper maturity, they repeat, “Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning is now and will be forever.”

As it was in the beginning, so go morning prayers as they do every day at 8:30 a.m. sharp.

Pine scent drifts from a Christmas tree up front decorated with white angels, each inscribed with the name of deceased sisters and their dates of death back to the 1800s. Prayer for the deceased is part of daily life here.

The sisters sit mostly one to a wooden pew beside floor-to-ceiling stained glass. Those whose bodies allow it come each morning. Seven sisters sit in veils. Four wear no obvious signs of their religious life, including their general superior, Sister Bridget Sullivan, who sits in back looking like she is all business.

A phone ringing down the hall goes ignored.

In less than 15 minutes, it’s over. A few stay for private prayers. Most leave for work, doctor appointments, rest, in-house activities or whatever awaits them this morning.

There was a day when most piled into cars together, typically in pairs or trios, to go wherever they worked, many teaching at Bishop England High School or nursing at St. Francis Xavier Hospital. They’d gossip and comfort each other as only people who work together can.

Now, those who head off to ministry work do so alone.

For most who have professed vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, the sun has set on the days of ministry outside.

But not all.

One sister travels the country to discuss the needs of elderly nuns.

Others, some well into their 70s, visit nursing homes.

One of their most active ministries is an outreach for low-income residents on rural Johns Island. Three sisters provide everything from emergency help to seasonal farm workers to English tutoring and home repairs. They raised thousands of toys for children in need this Christmas.

In another still-active area, three sisters work at Christ Our King Catholic Church, with its 2,500 families, and its school in such demand that it operates with a waiting list.

Sister Stella Maria Craven, principal, and Sister Mary Cyril Murray, who works with seniors, are among the few OLM sisters who still work together. The third is Sister Donna Lareau, the only one of the three who lives at the motherhouse.

Sister Donna describes how she misses the camaraderie of the days when the sisters could work together more. "It's one of the hardest parts of the reduced numbers," she says.

Then she drives to Mount Pleasant, alone.
Sister Donna entered the convent in 1967. Only one other woman has joined since.

As the number of sisters dwindles, Sister Donna works with the growing number of Roman Catholic parishioners in the Charleston area. It's the paradox of today's Roman Catholic Church in America: More people are joining, but there are fewer priests and nuns to serve them.

For 20 years, Sister Donna taught school, most recently at Bishop England. She was among the last of the nuns to teach there. The chapel is named to honor the sisters, but there are no OLMs who teach at the area's only Catholic high school.

Nor are there any at Bon Secours St. Francis Hospital, which the nuns founded as just one of their gifts to Charleston.

Still, wherever they go, people know them.

To understand how much the sisters are woven into Charleston's history, go grocery shopping with Sister Roberta Bridgeman. She and another sister, both in black-and-white habits, go every Thursday at 8:30 a.m. to the Piggly Wiggly on Harborview Road.

They're welcomed by the store manager who proudly explains that Sister Roberta taught him in kindergarten. Sister Roberta looks dubious.

She doesn't remember him.

Well, she decides, that's probably a good thing. After teaching so many generations of school kids, she remembers the troublemakers.

She grabs a cart and encounters another manager she knows who teases the sisters. "We need to keep a close eye on them," deli/bakery manager Leslie Busche says.

Then Sister Roberta runs into her biological sister, Isabelle L. Bridgeman, another tiny, silver-haired woman. These days, they can stop and chat as they like.

Up and down the aisles, piling up cart after cart, they shop for more than an hour.

Eight carts and $846 worth of groceries later, they head home.

MEMORIES OF LONG AGO

Two sisters here are 96. Two more are in their 90s. Four are in their 80s.

Atop the list is Sister Brendan Lacey, a songbird of a woman who sits in a comfy chair looking out a window at the harbor. She's earned the view. Her fingers lace around rosary beads as she thinks back over her 80 years as an OLM.

At 96, she's almost the oldest here. Sister delteri Faase, also spry and sharp, has her beat by two months.

Born in 1908, Sister Brendan wanted to be a nun since she was 13 years old back in her native Ireland. At 16, she visited a convent and found a world where sisters ate in silence and couldn't walk outside alone. Bedtime, wake time, prayer time all clicked at the pace of a clock.

The nuns told her about these sisters in South Carolina who needed help. Where Ireland was Catholic-rich, Charleston loomed a mission field. The people were poor and few were Catholic.

She hopped aboard a ship to New York. It was 1924.

It also was August. Back in Ireland the temperature topped at 67.

From New York, she and several other girls took a boat toward Charleston. The boat was small and the waters rough as they ventured to this place so far from home with God-knows-what awaiting them.

Then it began to get hot. Not just regular hot. "Unmercifully hot."

Still, she doesn't recall being especially nervous or scared. "When you're 16, you don't have many adult moments! We had this mission spirit. We came to give our lives to God. I felt He was calling me here."

They traveled by streetcar to the motherhouse, which then was downtown behind the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist. It was mostly empty that day because the sisters were on a retreat.

Sister Brendan climbed the four flights of stairs to her room, marked her clothes and began her novitate. She went to bed when she was told, got up when she was told and got the dreaded job of cleaning the stairs. She was a послеg girl assigned a chore that left her knees raw. Four flights of stairs had to be swept with a hand broom and dustpan, then waxed.
It was a day with no air-conditioned relief from Charleston summers. There were no screens on the windows to bar the mosquitoes. The sisters hung nets around their beds for bug protection.

Six months later, Sister Brendan got her habit and a new name. It was like getting married in some ways. She was sent to train as a nurse at St. Francis hospital.

It was 1926. She'd never stepped foot in a hospital before. Her job: birth babies. There was little medicine and not much to help a laboring woman besides a caring nurse.

Sister Brendan stayed at St. Francis until 1950. She then was sent to a York County hospital where she stayed until 1992. By then, she was 82 years old. She moved to an apartment in Greenville to assist a sister working there.

Finally, last year she returned to the motherhouse.

Today, she spends much of her days in prayer. She also hits all the in-house activities — exercise class, art class and especially game day. The first baby she brought into the world still visits. And when the sisters had a contest to see who could create the best Christmas wreath, Sister Brendan came in second.

Her reminiscing is cut short by the phone ringing beside her bed. She hates to be rude, but it's a call from England. Her eyes light up and she grins wide. Life is good.

A CHANGING CANVAS

Four sisters sit at long tables in a large all-purpose room. It's Wednesday morning, which means Gretchen Degenhardt is here. She's an art teacher from Charleston Catholic School who comes to teach the sisters about color and perspective.

It's one of the activities that Sister Bridget, the general superior, has started for those who no longer can do outside ministry work. Now they have art class, exercise class and games.

All four pick up their colored pencils and hunker down to finish Christmas pictures.

Sister Mary Clementine quickly emerges as the class cutup. She's a tiny woman with the gleam of someone who spent a lot of years in a classroom full of kids.

She soon has her art class comrades recalling the days before the elder sisters needed extra activities to keep their minds and bodies busy.

When they joined, the sisters awoke every morning to a bell rung 33 times, once for each year of Christ's life. The bell woke them up, called for silence, began prayers, meals, the Rosary, Mass.

"Everything ran on the bell," Sister Clementine recalls. "You felt like you were a cog in a wheel, at least I did."

When the sisters walked outside, they had to go in pairs. They wore floor-length black habits and caps under their bonnets, even in summer. For reason enough, it was called a "penitential" habit. In the chapel, sweat dripped down their faces and backs despite the two large fans buzzing.

The life was to be contemplative. Some around here miss that. Some miss the cloistered feel of the bedroom areas where today family and friends can come and go, where chatter at times rings out around their bedrooms.

Sister Mary Thomas stops her colored pencil for a moment. "It was very conducive to prayer."

Yet, from the start, the OLMS have looked outward.

Some religious orders send nuns all over the world to serve their missions. The OLMS, however, have spent 175 years primarily serving Charleston. Its first bishop, John England, oversaw a diocese that covered South Carolina, North Carolina and a bit of Georgia. It was huge, in a day before cars.

Bishop England came from Ireland and appealed to sisters there to come to this rural place so full of poverty. He established the OLMS with its first four members in 1829.

Four years later, he told a Catholic convention that the sisters had "met my most sanguine expectations; not only have they been exceedingly useful for the purpose of education, but they had generously offered their services at a time when it was feared that the cholera would bring its desolating influence upon us."

That was just the start.

They opened a school for freed slaves, helped the poor, whatever the bishop needed. They treated the sick and wounded for both the Union and Confederacy. They suffered alongside Charleston, and helped rebuild it, after war, fire, earthquake and Hurricane Hugo.
But they also suffered with the rules.

Families couldn’t come to visit at will. Nor could a new sister leave the house as she wanted.

"It was a tremendous hardship," Sister Donna recalls.

The sisters had to walk in pairs and couldn’t stop and talk to old friends or family. It led to struggles. Some sisters left, a separation that Sister Donna compares to a divorce or the loss of a best friend.

So much has changed. Sister Donna’s mother stayed here one recent weekend and also recuperated here after surgery.

The house has changed too. Not long ago, the sisters called their rooms "cells." For good reason. Sister Bridget recalls how she could stand in the middle of her room and touch both walls.

And don’t get her started on the communal bathrooms.

Thank God, times have changed.

LIFE HERE, FOREVER

It was 1967 when Sister Donna entered the convent. She was 18. She moved into a house of nuns mostly in their 50s and 60s.

"I was foolish and arrogant. I knew everything at 20!" she says. "(The older sisters) truly loved me. They just shook their heads."

She recently asked them why they put up with her. "That’s what this is all about," one answered.

And that means forever.

There was a day when their earthly parting of ways typically took place at St. Francis hospital. Today, even the most frail sisters can live at home. And die at home.

Before Hurricane Hugo hit, sisters died at the hospital. The 1989 storm took out 500 trees and blew several onto the roof. First, the sisters opened their house to become a distribution center for food, clothing and other needs.

Then they gutted and rebuilt their home. Bedrooms now are closer to the average room, big enough to accommodate a wheelchair. Just as important: Each has its own bathroom.

The sisters also added Maria Hall, a wing for sick and elderly sisters. It looks like an assisted-living facility. Wood railings stretch along long corridors of bedrooms. A nurse station sits in the middle near a cozy dining area.

Sisters can stay in their rooms with the security of call buttons, a nurse and nurse aides to help with their needs. Hospice can come if needed.

"It's set up to care for people until they die, so we can take care of them here as long as possible," Sister Bridget says. "It's their home."

AND WILL BE FOREVER

What started with one or two women will, one day, end with one or two.

In the past 40 years, just three women have joined the OLMs. The last was nearly 20 years ago.

Ministries in teaching and nursing have ended for many here. But they’re far from ending their rich history serving Charleston.

Several of the sisters are at the height of their ministries.

Need roof repairs? After Hurricane Hugo, that’s what Sister Carol Wentworth did. Need education help on Johns Island? That’s where she is now.

Sister Carol is the baby at 54. Unlike in years past when sisters usually joined as teenagers, she joined at age 34. Today, she works at the OLM Outreach on Johns Island running after-school programs mostly for Hispanic and black residents.

Along with Sister Carol, Sisters Ann Billard and Donna are among the most recent joinees. They are the faces of the OLMs today.

"We’re looking forward and looking for ways to help people," Sister Donna says. "We’re discerning among ourselves where the spirit is leading us into the 21st century."
She points to the priesthood, also facing a shortage of new vocations. American parishes increasingly are calling on priests from Africa and India. A priest from India holds Mass at the motherhouse each evening.

Sister Donna dreams of inviting women from those countries to stay here. Perhaps they could live in the empty bedrooms at the motherhouse and train to become teachers or doctors.

Sister Ann has earned her doctorate in pastoral counseling and now works with elder sisters. It began when she read research that showed spiritual people tend to be less depressed as they age. But while working with elder nuns, she realized, "Not every sister comes to the end of her life happy, joyous and full."

Why not?

She began a research study to find out.

In life outside the convent, older people typically have younger generations of family who help them find an identity — often as grandma or grandpa — even after their work years have ended.

That's not the case for nuns.

"Ministry was such an important part of their lives that when they're not able to do that, it's a very difficult transition." Sister Ann explains. "They must find another way to live out the gospel."

Those sisters also worry about the order's future. Today, lay people do much of what the sisters once did.

"There will always be a place for religious life in the church," Sister Ann says. "But it will be different."

She sits beside Sister Carol. They both ponder this.

Yes, times have changed.

Some wonder whether they should merge with another order. So far, they've said no.

"We don't want to lose our identity as the OLMs, which are so connected to Charleston," Sister Ann explains.

Then will they die out?

Sister Ann answers first. She prefers to work hard now. "To me, it's about what we need to do today."

Sister Carol agrees. "If people are going to come, they're going to come."

"And if they don't," Sister Ann adds, "we have served our mission to the church."
It wasn't like St. James Episcopal Church, a smallish community church, to send out mailings advertising itself. But times were changing, as much at St. James as anywhere.

People had found things to do on Sundays that didn't include going to church.

This fall, St. James made big changes that church leaders hoped would attract people who had fallen away or never been part of the Christian faith.

For one, the James Island church opened a new $4 million ministry center to host a growing contemporary worship service that featured less pomp and more modernity.

Plus, the church planned to offer the popular "40 Days of Purpose" series, one with a national track record of drawing in newcomers.

So this fall, St. James launched a blitz that included radio advertising and mailing brochures to 10,000 households, urging folks to "Get Connected." It was the most this church of about 350 attendees had spent on such a thing.

"We took a big leap of faith," recalls Scooter Barnett, a St. James member who oversaw the series. "We'd never reached out in quite that way."

That's because St. James, like most churches, had carried on like always, as if church life still was life. Of course, you belonged to a church. Everyone did. There was no need to change.

Now those days have gone.

A MODERN WORLD

The old assumption of "If we build it, they will come" doesn't work anymore.

Since 1991, the number of American adults who don't attend church has nearly doubled, rising from 39 million to 75 million, according to a survey conducted earlier this year by The Barna Group.
More than half of those "unchurched" people called themselves Christians.

"Unchurched people are not just lazy or uninformed," George Barna, the study's director, said. "They are wholly disinterested in church life, often passionately so."

Plus, as lives become busier, more harried and more secular, God’s day of rest competes with precious time for family and recreation. And rest.

Christianity also competes with today's New Age religions, Eastern philosophies and a more individualistic form of spirituality that appeals to younger generations.

These people pick and choose from different beliefs to create their own faith smorgasbords.

All of this has led to a huge shift in church philosophy.

"The reason the church exists today isn't to minister to its members. It exists for people on the outside," said Doug Gray, associate rector of St. Paul's Episcopal in Summerville. "For the first time, churches are having to think creatively to serve 21st-century people."

More churches, invigorated with a new passion to evangelize, are making seismic shifts in their worship styles to reach people who live in a culture of rock and rap, fast-pace and self-help.

"We have a whole generation that we haven't reached," said Mike Lewis, senior pastor of Cathedral of Praise in North Charleston, which has grown to 2,500 members in just 17 years. "We've got to get into the generation. We've got to speak their language and play their music."

Today's big buzzword: "cultural relevance."

Want to motivate people to come in your doors? Play music that sounds like what's in their CD player. Lose the robes, the pews, the candles, the hymns, the signs and symbols. Use a self-help format like all those best sellers.

In short, make it fun and make it easy.

Let's be blunt: These churches want you.

FINDING A PURPOSE

Up front, four women perform a few contemporary Christian songs. A few people raise their hands heavenward. The group of roughly 150 people is mostly middle-aged and mostly new to St. James.

The question: Will they find their God-given purpose in 40 days?

Rick Warren's face soon appears on three giant screens around the church's ministry center. He's a pretty plain-looking man, balding with glasses in front of a plain blue backdrop. Today's lesson is on evangelism. He understands that people feel weird about it.

Warren, a mega-church pastor from California, is all about getting over that.

"Is anyone getting into heaven because of you?" he asks. Don't be creepy, he warns. But don't be shy. "The church that doesn't grow is saying to the world, 'We don't care about you. You can go to hell.'"

Indeed, many of those gathered around the tables are newcomers who came because someone invited them to attend this series, based on Warren's mega-popular book "The Purpose Driven Life." The book has sold 20 million copies and remained atop The New York Times best-seller list for almost two years by promoting familiar Christian themes such as evangelism and discipleship.

Warren packages the ideas into a simple, self-help format made for a modern audience. The series brings people into a church for some modern music, dinner and a chance to meet new people. And it seems to work.

St. James was among 10,000 churches nationwide that used the program this fall because churches have found it such an effective tool.

"He's presenting it in a way that draws people who have walked with (the church) and who have never heard of Jesus Christ," Barnette says.

CHANGING FACES

In perhaps no denomination locally is this move toward the modern more evident than among Episcopalians, once the Holy City's heart of "high" church. St. James is just one example.
St. Andrew's Episcopal in Mount Pleasant packs in thousands — and growing — with a heavy focus on evangelism backed by praise music, highly practical messages, a gilty Web site and its popular Alpha series, a commitment-light Christianity 101 class for doubters and seekers.

St. Paul's Episcopal nestled in historic Summerville also offers a large contemporary service, Alpha and a new church service that targets the unchurched. Then there's Holy Cross, Christ Episcopal Church, the list goes on.

"A lot have gone from being very traditional — and there are still those elements — to also more contemporary worship and an emphasis on reaching out," Gray says. "I've seen that trend, and it's very encouraging.

Not all Episcopalians share his enthusiasm. Many have switched to traditional stalwarts like the majestic Grace Episcopal downtown where congregants worship to a renowned choir singing classic hymns.

Then there's the highly liturgical Roman Catholic Church, whose local parishes are bursting at their stained-glass windows.

Yet, that's not slowing the change.

The national Episcopal Church held a conference this summer to discuss Jesus' command to "build my church." Presiding Bishop Frank Griswold explained his desire to see the church's average Sunday attendance double by 2020.

CHURCH FOR THE UNCHURCHED

It's a hot Saturday night in Summerville at Doug Gray's house. It's mid-June, and the associate pastor hosts a friendly crowd for a potluck supper and upbeat praise music.

A small crowd of kids and adults mingle around a board that reads "Saturday Night @ St. Paul's! Come As You Are." It's the name of a new worship service they're creating to attract God's doubters and wafflers.

When it's time to start, they gather in the living room. They pray for a baby about to come, for a teen who lacks interest in God, for marriages celebrated and for people "who find God irrelevant."

They read a passage from Mark, probably the oldest Gospel. It's the story of Jesus launching his ministry. He finds two brothers casting a net into the Sea of Galilee. "Come follow me," he urges. "And I will make you fishers of men."

What can this group in jeans and goatees learn from the story?

Several people offer ideas. Gray goes last. Jesus angered the Jewish leaders of his day. He shook things up. "He went out to people, where they were, in some offensive ways. In Mark, we see ministry that's messy, that's risky," Gray says.

Churches need to get out of their comfort zones. Gray knows he has ticked off a few people in the past with his zeal for mold-breaking.

"People's feathers will get ruffled, and if they're not, we're doing something wrong," he tells the group. "If God is showing up, and we're able to connect with our culture and those things are happening, then we are on the right track."

That means Saturday Night @ St. Paul's will invite church-seekers and doubters to grab fists full of buttered popcorn, sip lemonade and hear some rocking praise music.

They'll also hear Gray tackle their biggest doubts in his sermon, "What Good is the Church?"

LET THE PEOPLE CREATE

The Rev. Vance Polley has heard plenty about "seeker-sensitive services" and the faith's huge transition today.

As pastor of Sunrise Presbyterian Church on Sullivan's Island, he wondered: What do people really want?

Instead of deciding that himself, he asked his members to create a service the way they wanted. Laypeople would plan a new service, write and deliver sermons and pick the songs and music style.

He got a small team together. And their choices surprised him.

For instance, Polley expected they might toss the corporate confession part of the traditional service (some folks have told him it's a "downer"). They kept it.

Did they go for guitars and drums? Nope. They opted for a more acoustic version of the hymns they knew and loved, plus a few new ones. Depending on the talents at their disposal, they played classical guitar, flute and piano.

Their choices suit Polley fine. "We're all in this together," he says.
COMING TO THE CHURCH

Richard Bath promised to devote his retirement to God. But, at 55, he didn't know how.

Gone were the long days working at the Commissioners of Public Works. Now he had plenty of free time to reflect on his life's many bad choices.

He filled hours asking God to forgive him, praying and studying the Bible.

Still, he realized he needed to be around people.

He needed a church.

Yet, he felt shy about just showing up a stranger.

Then, nine months into retirement, he opened the mailbox and found a postcard addressed to "resident." It was an invitation to St. James' "40 Days of Purpose" series.

It gave him a reason try the church.

First, it was a class, not a worship service. Plus, there would be lots of other people who didn't know anyone else either.

He could make friends, get inspired and perhaps find a church where he felt comfortable. Or, he could vanish after 40 days.

On the first night, he wandered into the church's new ministry center, a large room filled with round tables and chairs. Giant banners read "EVANGELISM" and "DISCIPLESHIP." People reached out to him, introduced themselves, welcomed him. He felt at home. And the message struck him.

"It's not about me. It's about God," he realized. "I learned so many things in the program. Now, I can devote my time to helping others instead of running from them."

The program ended last month. Since then, Bath has joined the church and become active.

He spends Mondays at Bible study, Wednesdays at a group study, Thursdays at praise band practice, Fridays at a breakfast for men plus more band practice and Sundays at Bible study and worship.

It's all he, and the leadership of St. James, had hoped for
There you sit before the Charleston Symphony Orchestra, its musicians creating a glorious rapture for you and others here for the experience.

The audience claps to the lively rhythm, right? Oh, no.

People raise their hands heavenward and respond, "Amen!" Not likely.

Many of those who've come tonight are black? Very doubtful.

Not unless this is a night when the orchestra performs with its CSO Gospel Choir, a cultural bridge unlike any other in Charleston. The gospel choir and orchestra have forged a sort of union not found in any other city.

As usual, the CSO performers mostly are white. But tonight, the singers are mostly black, the audience about equally mixed.

From the resolute depths of "Go Down Moses" to the majesty of "Holy, holy, holy," the songs rise from the pages of traditional church hymnals and from memories of spirituals intoned in the fields.

Those on hand smile. They sway and clap. They call out responses to the worship of a God who brought them from very different paths to this fusion of sound.

Music, as alto Sarah Jayne later notes, "is a real leveler of people." Just listen.

"Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty!

"Early in the morning our song shall rise to thee."

A NOVEL CONCEPT

Lee Pringle has enjoyed the most traditional of symphony performances, has sung in a good many, too, with the Charleston Symphony Orchestra Chorus.

Yet, he couldn't help but notice the scarcity of people who looked like him both up front and in the audience.

He wasn't alone. Folks with the Charleston Symphony saw a need to reach out beyond the usual audience of older, whiter, wealthier Charleston.

Leah Greenberg, then head of CSO marketing and development, approached Pringle. She'd
created a group that later would be named the Community Partners Committee. Its mission: Reach out into communities the symphony hadn't reached.

Would Pringle help?

Pringle had joined the CSO board in 1996. At the time, he was one of only three blacks on the 75-member board, and the CSO's executive director was trying to broaden its reach. Then came Greenberg's request that Pringle chair Community Partners.

Pringle agreed.

Community Partners held its first outreach at Allan Park in 1997. They got together people from Burke High and local choral groups to perform in the predominantly black neighborhood where old Charleston homes feature wide porches and well-worn rocking chairs, perfect for hearing live music.

Then Pringle took the CSO to join an outreach performance in Ridgeville, his hometown.

The efforts were hits with audiences and the CSO board.

In stepped Wally Seinsheimer Jr., a developer, builder and former CSO board member.

Seinsheimer, a white Jewish guy, happened to have a passion for gospel and blues. When a good friend invited him to see the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra's Gospel Christmas Concert, he went along.

"I loved it!" he recalls. "Besides the music, which I adored, it was a mixed-race audience."

He went home thinking of how the high-quality orchestral music meshed with gospel and attracted a diverse audience. "I was concerned there were no black faces in the audience at the CSO and no black faces playing in the orchestra."

Seinsheimer took Pringle and the CSO's then-executive director, Darrell Edwards, to Atlanta.

"We came home and flat sold it to the board of directors," Seinsheimer says.

Then the symphony faced financial problems. Donations foundered. So did the dreams of creating a racial bridge of music in Charleston.

"No more shall they in bondage toil. Let my people go. Let them come out with Egypt's spoil. Let my people go."

BUILDING A CHORUS

Then came the new 1999-2000 season. Board members asked Pringle to create a CSO Gospel Choir.

Pringle had plenty of other things on his plate. He lives in Charleston near his family half the time. The rest of the time, he lives in Charlotte, where he's a senior consultant at pension fund giant TIAA-CREF. Plus, he wasn't plugged into Charleston's hot mover and shaker scene.

But if the CSO would commit the resources, Pringle agreed to form a choir.

Dr. James C. Allen, then board president, and his wife donated $5,000 seed money, mostly to buy musical arrangements because the CSO had none for gospel. Seinsheimer, then vice president, donated money for choir robes.
Then Pringle, today the choir's president, faced a pretty basic question. How would he reach the best singers in Charleston's black churches? Charleston lacked a large professional group of black residents involved in big choirs or glee clubs whose members would have the musical discipline to perform with the CSO.

And discipline was paramount. The gospel choir would be firmly attached to the symphony, a relationship Pringle hasn't found in any other city. That meant it had to be something the CSO could put its name behind.

"It will always be the symphony's gospel choir," Pringle says, "not a choir that sings gospel music."

Building that choir took a year.

Pringle invited to dinner people like Lon Shull, director of Charleston Men's Chorus, and Robert Taylor, symphony chorus director. Then he called on Emily Remington, the symphony chorus' former director.

They agreed to help.

Then came time to put out the call for a director. The person who rose to the top was perhaps least likely. Vivian Jones was then the revered choral director at Burke High School. But Pringle worried the longtime music teacher's approach would be too academic, too clinical for something like gospel. She'd also never worked with a symphony before.

Then Pringle saw her work.

"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna, Hosanna, Hosanna!"

BLENDING PEOPLE

Passion is obvious with Jones in her grand, throaty voice and her big goals. Yet, she also likes to use the word "academic" when describing her gospel choir. If there's one thing she insists on, it's vocal accuracy.

"I can do gospel music. That's my heritage," she says. "But I approach it with vocal quality."

She and Pringle agreed on two things. One, the gospel choir would stand with the best choirs in Charleston. Two, it wouldn't be only a black thing.

They put out word for singers. That first year, they chose 80 people. All but two were black.

Singing in the choir was no simple request. The all-volunteer choir today performs three to four times a year. Joining means weekly rehearsals for most of the year.

Plus, Jones made it clear that they would not sing the songs like they did in church. Each person wouldn't bring an unique interpretation. Beauty would come from the group. Voices would blend.

"People who like pure gospel were kind of miffed," she says.

Some left, some stayed.

The result? "We don't sound like 50 people singing up there," Jones says proudly.

In August 2000, the CSO Gospel Choir was born.

They tapped guest conductor Vincent Danner, associate director of the Memphis Symphony. He would do programming and guest conduct when the choir sang with the
CSO. Jones would prepare the singers.

Yet, the first audiences were almost all white.

"At first people who came to hear gospel didn't know how to act. And people who came to hear the symphony didn't know how to act," Jones recalls. "Now, when they leave us, they're smiling. It's electric."

And friendships were born.

"Oh, deep in my heart,
I do believe.
We shall overcome some day . . ."

CROSSING LINES

Sarah Jayne saw the choir perform twice at her church, Circular Congregational. It was so uplifting, she decided to try out. She'd sung in church choirs before, but this just sounded so different.

There she met her "alto friends." Soon after, Jayne stood holding hands with a group harmonizing "We Shall Overcome."

In some way, they have overcome, she and her friends in the alto section. They've overcome what many call "the most segregated hour in America." That is, the most important hour of the week for many Christian faithful, the hour of church time, God's time.

One of the most diverse sections, the choir's altos also are among the closest.

There Jayne met people like Jacqueline Davis, a registered nurse who'd joined the choir after its first year and today is section leader. Jayne, a white woman who didn't grow up with gospel at home, and Davis, a black woman who did, now talk about an alto sisterhood.

"It's not just a group of Baptists or Catholics," Davis says. "There are lots of different cultures and ways people sing. It's just totally different from anything I've ever been in."

Through the chorus, for instance, she met a Baptist woman whose friendship touched her deeply. Davis is Catholic and had little desire to try another church. But when her friend had to preach at church, she went to lend moral support.

"It was so good to hear her speak the Lord's word," Davis recalls. "She's not about to leave her church home, but it gave her a new respect for another denomination."

And Jayne recalls learning that slaves at times weren't allowed to sing, were banned from this ultimate form of worship. "It hit me really hard."

The altos don't all eat at each other's homes yet, haven't joined each other's churches or crossed all those lines that still exist in our world. But they're taking steps.

"As with every relationship, it takes time," Jayne says.

"Amazing grace! How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now I see . . ."
MOVING AHEAD

The CSO itself can commit only to the choir’s annual Christmas performance. Pringle knew that director Jones needed more, needed something of her own.

So they spun off spring and winter shows that would feature only the choir without the orchestra. Jones would choose the songs, craft the sound.

Then a new book came out, a glossy, coffee-table book called “Crowns: Portraits of Black Women in Church Hats.” Black-and-white photographs featured 50 women in a range of hats from somber to flirtatious.

Jones put the portraits to the sound of spirituals and collaborated with the Hat Ladies of Charleston, uniting two more uncommon Charleston cultures.

The result was “Crown of Crowns,” named for the book.

In spring 2002, “Crowns” became the gospel choir’s first stand-alone performance. The performance sold out and was followed by two performances at Piccolo Spoleto Festival.

Since then, the choir sells out most of its shows in a day when it’s not easy to sell performance arts.

“It was like an ambassador of sorts for the symphony,” Pringle says. “It was very, very well received.”

Or, as Jones recalls, “It all let loose.”

Even among Charleston’s diverse art communities, Ellen Dressler Moryl, the city’s cultural affairs director, finds nothing like it that unites cultures. “It’s African-American history that every single one of us can relate to,” she says.

Despite the success, Jones isn’t relaxing. Next, she wants to sell out the Gaillard Auditorium. And she plans to work harder on finding the gospel choir’s signature sound. She also wants to take the CSO Gospel Choir and travel.

For now, plans are in store for the choir to perform at the large Friendship Missionary Baptist Church in Charlotte on July 24. It will be the choir’s first road trip.

“I don’t want them ever to get comfortable,” Jones smiles.

“God has smiled on me
He has been good to me.”

BRIDGING GULFS

Still, the problem persisted: How to attract black audiences?

Pringle had an idea, one not that popular among the singers. Each singer would be responsible for selling 20 tickets.

“With that, we saw the racial makeup change dramatically!” Pringle laughs.

They kept coming.

“Ours are the most diverse audiences you’ll find in Charleston. I guarantee it,” Jones says. Today, audiences are almost equally mixed.

And as more white people saw the choir perform, more tried out. Today, the choir is about 75 percent black, 25 percent white. They are Catholic and Baptist, housekeepers and rich
"Our denomination is God," Jones says. "We take all comers. Some people come for the music, some for the fellowship, some for the vocal respect. You are defined by your commitment, your vocal contribution and your commitment to the Lord."

Still, some singers have felt the sting of slights that mirror the broader society's racial tensions.

"Some felt that all the good songs were going to black singers, and white people were getting all the hokey songs," Pringle says. Other times, black singers felt "whites shouldn't be singing songs because they don't sound black enough."

Pringle warned that if race played into who sang what, "you're not going to be part of this group. No one is going to go around and create an undercurrent that's not representative of the group."

He credits Jones for her openness in helping people bond across racial lines.

"I've seen growth in a lot of people. I don't come in with prejudice, and I won't allow it," she says. "I have to be able to look you in the eye as I conduct. And you have to look me in the eye when you respond."

Now Jones and the choir are at work telling stories.

They're at work on "Retrospection: African-American Sacred Songs," which sold out on Palm Sunday and will be back May 28 and 29 for two performances as part of Piccolo Spoleto Festival.

The choir will perform selections from a new 1,100-page "African-American Heritage Hymnal." The hymnal preserves in print the oral tradition of black sacred songs.

The performance aims to tell a story about the spiritual journey of a people. Most songs are about coming up from slavery. The shows include narrators who lead audiences on that journey.

"Our audiences come out knowing more than they did coming in," Jones says. "They're not just hearing music."

For Jones, "Retrospection" is about a people's history, her people's history. But the music is for, and can be sung by, everyone.

"We're not just saying, 'This is our music, so back off.' It is God's music," Jones says.
He hadn't wanted to go to the white school in the first place. Donnie Woods, a teenager who'd grown up on a farm with his 18 siblings, loved the black high school in the city. It was safe. It was comfortable. Black teachers there cared about him.

Then came integration. In 1970, Woods found himself thrust onto the doorstep of the white high school in rural Louisville, Miss. It wasn't so much his fellow students whose cold shoulders bruised him. Those came from the white teachers.

But Woods had a sense of humor and a quiet courage, even in a day when crosses burned on his country road, and white police officers beat his brothers in front of his family.

Woods ran for senior class president. Why not? His class was 68 percent black.

He won with 78 percent of the vote.

But the school adviser said no. So Woods ran for vice president. He got 90 percent of the vote. Still, the school adviser said no.

Woods confronted her. He'd won, fair and square.

She turned to him. The major universities would send recruiters to his school. It was the senior class president's job to show them around.
"And we'll not have your black face being the first one they see."

Woods stood silent.

He still summons the memory from time to time, when even the big office with all the books, the responsibilities and the title don't help. He remembers the Lord had a plan for him, one that meant Donnie Woods did not, could not, become an angry young black man in a racist America.

Today, at 49, Woods has become the first black to lead the Lowcountry's nearly 18,000 Presbyterian faithful. He preaches at white and black churches, counsels white and black pastors, steers the missions that reach out to people of all needs.

He's here, he says, to bring people together. It's why, when the job tests his patience and saps his confidence, he still summons the memories of division.

LIFE ON THE FARM

Woods was the ninth of 19 kids his mother welcomed to a segregated world. It was a time when children meant a farm's success. His father, George, owned one of the largest black farms in the Louisville area, at one point spanning 125 acres, big as most white farms nearby.

Instead of picking white people's cotton, his family picked their own.

Farming was a way of life for their entire community. The local black school even started in January so kids could harvest in the fall. But it also went only to eighth grade.

"The idea was you'd graduate the eighth grade and go work on the farm," Woods recalls. "There was no vision beyond that."

Yet, his older siblings found other ideas. They moved north for better-paying factory jobs.

Woods became the farm's heir-apparent in his father's eyes.

Trouble was, Woods wanted to go to school.

He and his next-older brother, who were in the same grade, went to the black high school in the city. There they found a world where black mentors nurtured students, and the school insulated kids from the hostilities beyond.

He and his brother, Otis, also started a popular swing band. Everyone around the school and city knew the Woods Brothers.

Then came integration. Woods was 16.

"Overnight, we went from being involved in school and the community to another environment where nobody knew us, nobody cared about us," he recalls. "We left a safe environment and were really put on the firing line."

A HOSTILE WORLD

It's a tough memory to shake. Woods recalls sitting at a table near several white students and hearing one say: "Niggers won't ever do things white people will be proud of."

Although the racial makeup at the school was fairly equal, "It had the flavor of being a hostile environment." For the most part, white and black students tried to work out the anxious situation hoisted upon them.

Not so with the teachers and administration.

His adviser was adamantly: "Black kids ought to go to trade school. They simply lack the ability to take college prep courses."

At home, Woods found his parents indifferent.

High school was not so important to George Woods. He wanted his son home learning to run the farm. School competed with that.

Plus, integration meant his kids attended the white school from September to June. Who would pick the fall crops?

Finally, Otis dropped out. Woods was left alone at the school. "I was really hurt. This was my buddy, my bandmate," he recalls.

First, he got mad. Then he decided to avoid his brother's fate. That's when Woods ran for senior class president. He won the election but was denied by the school administration.

Woods went to his parents; his parents went to the school minister.
"Nobody could do anything about it," he says. "This was a system that was totally dysfunctional."

He decided to quit. He left the house one morning to tell his dad and walked across the field to the quiet place where his father prayed.

But first, Woods overheard his father's prayer. It was about him, about his troubles at school, his struggles in a racist world. "If it is your will, please use him in some area of service in your kingdom," his father murmured.

Woods tiptoed away, newly determined. He would excel in school. And that meant no more farming.

He and his father finally clashed.

"I am not gonna pick any more cotton!" Woods hollered at his dad. "I'm going to school — even if it costs me my life!"

The next day, the yellow school bus wound its way along the country road to his home. When it stopped out front, Woods saw his suitcase sitting by the side of the road.

He went to live with relatives until his mother brokered a truce. It was 1973, the last year his family grew cotton.

PATH TO GOD

George Woods switched the next year to growing cash crops. And he got a factory job.

It meant his children could think more freely about their futures. Woods envisioned marching off to college, bravely paving the road for his younger siblings.

Instead, after he graduated from high school, he took a job with Georgia-Pacific Corp. and spent three years deciding what to do with his life.

Meanwhile, he stayed active in his family's Presbyterian church. Then, in 1977, the church called Calvin Trippett, a fiery new pastor fresh from seminary. Woods hit it off with Trippett, one of the first black men to graduate from Mississippi State University — the first from their community.

The new pastor thought Woods might have a gift for ministry. When Trippett preached, Woods imagined himself up there: "I know what I want to do with my life!"

Woods enrolled at Mary Holmes College to do prep work. He graduated with honors and switched to Mississippi State. He graduated in 1981 with a bachelor's in philosophy and religion — on the President's List — less than a decade after his adviser told him black kids couldn't handle college prep.

One day, a church invited him to preach for Black History Month. He prepared a sermon for a black audience. When he walked in, he saw mostly white faces. He paused. Should he tone down his sermon?

He didn't.

As Woods greeted people at the door, a white visitor stopped. "Young man," he began. Woods took a breath. "Keep preaching like that because white people need to hear it, too."

Woods learned that the Gospel is the same for all people even if it upsets those who are comfortable.

HEALING WOUNDS

Woods was ready to set off for seminary and poised to jump into a leadership role. Was he ready? The sting of racism tore at his heart. At times, his anger burned hot.

He thought back to his high school advisor, to the slavery of his grandfather, to the crosses that burned on his country road. At one point, the Ku Klux Klan abducted his sister. She got home safely.

It was hard to move on.

Now a man of 27, Woods thought about his father. He thought about how much the older man had sheltered his kids from the country around them. It wasn't until college that Woods learned the three civil rights workers murdered in Mississippi were buried nine miles from the family's back door.

Woods also thought about how his father, with an eighth-grade education, had provided for them all. How his dad had brought him to the church. How he kissed each of his kids good night, every night.

George Woods did all this so his children wouldn't hate.
"I came to the realization that my father was the greatest man who ever lived," Woods says.

He made a decision. "I would not become an angry black man. I would live my life to bring people together across racial lines," he recalls.

He suddenly wanted, needed his father's blessing before he went to seminary.

Woods went home.

His father was on the governing council of their church. He knew the value of serving God. Woods pointed out that he even had a scholarship and support from the Presbyterian Church. His father listened. Then he spoke.

"Son, if you're bound and determined to do this, you'd better be the best minister you can be."

HEADING TO SEMINARY

Woods moved to Atlanta, that sophisticated big city and hub of the civil rights movement. By 1982, it had become a place so different from his rural town. There he found a thriving black middle class, something he'd never seen before.

"I knew my life would be transformed in almost miraculous ways," he recalls.

He went to Johnson C. Smith Theological Seminary, where he learned from professors who'd taught some of the nation's best black pastors, and he found himself under the wing of its dean, Dr. James Costen.

Costen sent Woods on internships to cosmopolitan churches, helped him refine his country dialect and mannerisms into the smooth, intellectual demeanor of today.

Woods graduated in 1985 and was ordained. He accepted a call from a Fort Lauderdale church, and then moved to Butler Memorial, a popular black church in Savannah, where he worked with everything from soup kitchens to the Savannah symphony. He also worked part-time on the presbytery's ministry for racial and ethnic issues.

There, Woods met Teresa, a mother of two young sons. Her mother was a church elder, and Woods soon learned her husband had committed suicide earlier. He was drawn to Teresa, and they began to date.

He and Teresa married and moved with her two sons to a small, dissident Charlotte church. They would soon have a daughter together as well.

Two years later, he heard the Charleston-Atlantic Presbytery was looking for an associate executive. He took the job because it involved promoting racial harmony, working on stewardship and evangelism and preaching at area Presbyterian churches.

He loved it. Then the executive presbytery job opened in 2002. He was elected.

It was a position held for 26 years by the retiring Rev. Barry Van Deventer. After Woods' election, Van Deventer called him, "the best person for the job, bar none, hands down."

The new role meant running a presbytery of 49 churches and 85 ministers who work in 12 counties across lower South Carolina. They span tiny country churches and the booming suburban Mount Pleasant Presbyterian and St. James Presbyterian on James Island, one of the nation's largest black Presbyterian churches.

While many mainstream Protestant denominations, Presbyterians included, have faced shrinking memberships, the local presbytery is growing slowly.

Woods said early on one goal is to promote racial harmony. He'd like to see more mixed Bible studies and conferences. He preaches at churches of all kinds. "I'd hope that they see me as an instrument of God rather than focusing on that we have a black preacher in the pulpit this Sunday."

The only downside? His father isn't alive to see all this.

George Woods died two years before his son's election. Woods delivered the eulogy, long at peace with their mended relationship.

Sitting in his bread office one recent day, Woods leans back in his chair and thinks of his father. So many of his life's roads lead back to the older man. He recalls the day he found his father in prayer. All these years later, "I've discovered what it means for God to answer the prayers of a struggling father."
The dapper suit has waited all day, laid out with a perfectly pressed striped shirt and necktie. Andre Kadima has waited more than four years for this day.

Andre dresses, heads out the front door of the Mount Pleasant house he's borrowing and drives to the Charleston International Airport. Finally.

He sprints through the airport doors. A tall and elegant man, Andre reaches the terminal wearing one giant grin. He paces, fidgets and hugs everyone he sees. Andre is giddy. He hasn't felt this way for a long, long time.

To save his life, Andre fled the Democratic Republic of Congo after a brutal attack in his home in December 1999. Since then, he's been alone.

The wounds on his body have healed. But depression and a biting loneliness have cut him deeply.

He hasn't seen his wife or his seven children in four years, four months.

During that time, Andre and a cadre of local volunteers have fought, navigated, prayed and nearly given up hope of getting his family to Charleston.

Then it happened. Six letters came in the mail last summer. The U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Services approved all but one of his children and his wife to move to Charleston. Now, six of his kids fly aboard an airplane somewhere above the skies of
South Carolina.

When Andre last saw them, the youngest was 6. Today, they are ages 10 to 21. None has ever been to the United States. Only one has left the Congo before. They speak no English and know little of American culture — not to mention the idiosyncrasies of the Old South city they are about to call home.

All they — or Andre — know is that they are about to be together. Finally.

A FAMILY AGAIN

Andre is followed into the airport by a small army of people toting cameras and homemade signs. They are the ones who've made this moment possible.

Most are volunteers from three very different local churches who have taken on Andre's cause. One is downtown, white and liberal. One is among the nation's largest black Presbyterian churches. The third is a booming, suburban congregation. To help Andre, their members have donated money and food while trudging through the red tape of immigration, housing, jobs and international travel.

They gather near a large window that overlooks the airport runways. Someone spots a Delta jet that's just landed and is rolling toward a nearby gate. The group scurries to the empty concourse that stretches between the gate and their post in a waiting area beyond the security check.

They hold up their signs and ready their cameras.

Andre scans the silent concourse, his hands jammed into his pockets. He shifts from foot to foot. He chuckles. He rubs his hands together.

A throng of airplane passengers emerges from the gate.

"That's them!" someone shouts.

The group explodes. Andre throws up his long arms. Six young people bolt down the concourse and into his arms. Andre is smothered in family. He pulls off his glasses for tears.

"Hallelujah!" a man hollers.

The kids hover beside Andre, silent among the mass of people who bombard them with a rush of English they don't understand. Strangers snap pictures and aim camcorders at them.

This, their new family, comes forward. Karen Waddill, who has supported Andre, welcomes them in French and offers each a bouquet of garden flowers. The kids clutch them. People approach with smiles and hugs.

Andre embraces people around him, thanking them.

"They are here," he says over and over.

The kids sneak long looks at Andre. This is their father. But after so long in the life of a child, has he become a stranger? Kenneth is the oldest at 21. He stands tall and poised with a striking resemblance to his dad. Peter, the youngest at 10, stands with saucer-wide eyes.

Pastor Charles Heyward Sr. calls the group together for prayer. His church, St. James Presbyterian, took in Andre when he arrived so suddenly.

The group forms a circle as airline passengers hurry by.

"You're an awesome God," Heyward begins. "We know when prayers go up that your blessings come down! It's been a long time, but we said that we would believe in you."

Andre turns to his kids and summarizes in French. They watch him intently, the two teenage girls who look so alike, the oldest son who looks like Andre, the second-oldest with the boyish grin and the two youngest boys. They all wear western clothes and stylish hairdos.

The adrenaline rush eases, and the kids look drained.

It's been a long wait followed by a long journey. They have just flown from Cameroon to Paris to Atlanta to Charleston.

They head off to retrieve luggage and begin their next journey, over rivers with strange names like Cooper and Wando. Andre lives in a house owned by Mount Pleasant Presbyterian, one of the three churches that have helped him the most. They are temporary quarters. He still needs a permanent home for his family.
The group piles into a white church van as the sun dips low in the sky, lighting up bands of burnt orange.

Then the van pulls away. This may be the hardest part of their journey yet.

PATH TO NOW

Andre’s two oldest sons, Kenneth and Andy, saw what happened that night in 1999.

Now, four years later, Andy spots the long, thin scar across his father’s hand for the first time. It brings back a cold fear. He prays, “To God bring the glory. We have to thank God,” he says.

They were the only two home that night with Andre when four masked, armed men stormed into their house around 4 30 a m. The men bound and gagged the boys, who then were 14 and 16.

The men found Andre, a prominent 49-year-old surgeon. They slashed him across his chest and cut his head. Bleeding and dizzy, he crumpled to the floor. One man sliced Andre’s left fingers, the surgeon’s tools.

Kenneth and Andy imagined their father being killed. “Is this the death we’re going to?” Andy wondered.

One man said he had orders to kill Andre. He demanded the photographs and videos Andre had taken to prove atrocities he’d witnessed.

The men found the pictures and videos, took them and left.

When the boys broke free, they rushed Andre to the hospital. Ten hours had passed. Fellow doctors hid Andre and treated him. He lived.

But his family urged him to flee: “They will come looking for you.”

Andre had become involved in helping the people of his tribe, the Luba, who were persecuted by another tribe in the nearby Katanga province. In 1992, he’d created a site for displaced people to get medical care. He saw people starving, sick, dehydrated. He saw 80 bodies come through in a day.

Andre wanted to help. He was a wealthy man in Africa’s third-largest country, a nation whose people have suffered under three great cruelties: Belgian colonialism, civil war and dictatorship.

He began to record what he saw — and shared his evidence with foreign aide agencies to urge their help. He also hosted meetings of an opposition political party. Still, he never imagined it would come to this.

Andre boarded a plane headed for the United States with only his wounds, a Bible and some clothes.

He would later learn the Congolese government had found him guilty of treason, punishable by death. It meant he could never go home.

Heyward and his church took in Andre, a devout Presbyterian. At first, Andre lived in a one-room apartment St. James owned. He had no money and lived alone on donated food. Days would pass without talking to people he knew.

Andre stopped eating much. A proud man, he’d often cry.

St. James was joined by Circular Congregational Church, which helped Andre find a job at the Medical University of South Carolina as a laboratory researcher. Then J. Westcook Sandlin, a local attorney, helped Andre petition the INS to get his family here.

It was summer 2000. A year passed, then two, then three.

Finally, one steamy day last July, Andre found six letters in the mail from the INS. Six of his children could join him.

Between church fund-raisers, Andre’s own money and donated air miles, they covered what would have been $10,000 in airline tickets. Mount Pleasant Presbyterian let Andre move into a church-owned house big enough for six children.

Still, he waited.

Each month since last July, Andre has thought the kids would be here soon. August, September, October, November, December, January, February, March.

Then came an e-mail from Victor Clark, a Circular volunteer who donated hours navigating travel plans. “The children are confirmed on April 26…”
A NEW HOME

After leaving the Charleston airport, Andre and his children drive home to a house crowded with food from well wishers. The kids, though, are exhausted and soon find their new beds.

The next day Andre takes them to Kmart to buy some basics.

In the Congo, food and clothes mostly are sold in open markets. Clothes often are sold used because that's what people can afford.

The children come from Kinshasa, the capital city of a country whose average per-capita income is $90 a year. Yet they were lucky. Once Andre was allowed to work in Charleston, he sent money home. In his absence, they remained, by Congo's standards, middle class.

Now, with the giant Kmart sign above them, they step into that epicenter of American consumerism: the mega-store.

How clean it is, they all marveled, so organized.

So much stuff.

They've seen most of these goods back home. But not so many choices.

A few days after visiting Kmart, a church volunteer takes the kids to the beach. None of them have seen the ocean before, never felt the crash of the waves or the tug of the current.

At first, the kids venture slowly into the waves. Then they band together to play soccer on the sand.

Back at home, a stream of people comes and goes. People bring meals every day. They donate clothes, books, toys, gift cards. Volunteers come by daily to teach the children English. And just about as often, someone stops in to take the kids out. They go to ball games, stores, the beach and restaurants.

Andre's son Andy grins, saying he and his siblings have felt so welcome. From what they'd heard in the Congo, they didn't expect to feel that way.

Not that it's easy fitting in.

TROUBLE MIXING

Andre receives a gift card to Lowe's, so one day in May he ventures to the bustling Mount Pleasant store, jammed with shoppers anxious to spiff up their homes and gardens.

They reach the checkout line, and James needs to use the bathroom.

Andre turns to Kenneth, his 21-year-old son, and hands over the gift card. Kenneth waits his turn. Andre heads off to find the bathroom.

When Kenneth's turn comes, he hands over the gift card. His items ring up $1.12 more than he has on the gift card. The cashier tells him this. He tells her he cannot speak English.

She doesn't speak French.

She explains again that he owes $1.12.

Kenneth has no money. A line of people waits. Mercifully, Andre arrives back.

For Andre, this is the hardest part. He must play go-between for so many things. In the grocery store, the kids leave their cart in the aisle where it sits in other shoppers' way. Andre moves the cart aside and apologizes to a shopper. Then he explains the proper placement of a grocery cart in a store.

"I have to teach them the way people are living here," he says, wearily.

On some days, it leaves him overwhelmed.

Perhaps from the stress of it all, Andre spends a week on the couch, wracked with pain from an old back injury.

He knows he must get up. He has six children to care for now.

Two days later, they file into a pew at Circular Congregational Church. Andre stands to introduce his children. The congregation
applauds loudly and stands. Someone hands Andre a microphone.

"Thank you for your prayers, support and everything you did with compassion," Andre says, as he has to all three congregations now. "I was suffering for four or five years. A lot of people in this church suffered with me."

For all of those years, Andre has come to worship here some Sundays, always alone. Not today. Now they are together. All except his oldest daughter, Lydia, whose black-and-white picture sits framed atop their TV set.

She was an adult when the family applied to join Andre here. Since the INS handles adults separately, she and Andre’s wife remain, still, in the Congo.

AT HOME TOGETHER

One May afternoon, the kids crowd around a computer set up on their dining room table. They chat, eat snacks and drink Sprite.

James and Peter, the two youngest boys, abandon the computer to goof around in Charleston straw hats and dark sunglasses. Kenneth and Andy talk with their father.

Hanging out in their bedroom adolescent-style, Priscilla and Evelyn listen to Destiny’s Child singer Beyonce and began to dance, singing the words. Post-it Notes hang around their room reminding them of the English words for things like “mirror.” The girls could be twins. Both highlight their hair with red. Both wear trendy jeans over their leggy bodies. Their hands fly over their mouths the same way when they’re nervous. They grin and giggle together.

There’s one unifier among Andre’s kids. They have a new favorite food: Wendy’s hamburgers.

Welcome to America.

But now they face the most expensive piece of the American Dream: a house.

Money at this point is the big obstacle. Andre needs a decent house that can fit an adult and six children. He can live in his borrowed home a while longer. But he hopes to find a permanent home before the school year starts in August so the children aren’t uprooted again.

Meanwhile, the kids must get used to life with Dad.

That means fewer teenage freedoms. In the Congo, they had no father at home. Kenneth and Andy say they assume Andre won’t be open to their going out at night with their friends.

Andre nods to assure them this is true. They are back under his roof.

He smiles, and so do they.

ON THE BEACH

The kids head to the Sullivan’s Island beach one hot June afternoon with Jane Cooper, a Mount Pleasant Presbyterian member who’s helping them settle in.

Andy glides around the sand on a bike, a grinning younger brother balanced on the handlebars. The girls wade into the surf in their jeans. One of the younger boys heads down the beach alone on his bike, past the tourists and beach residents.

Kenneth hangs back on a bicycle, a handsome young man in white shades and an Old Navy sun visor. After the Lowe’s episode, he has become more confident with his English skills.

"Ask some questions," he dares.

So how was life different in the Congo?

He leans forward on the handlebars and turns serious describing the political situation back home. He remembers when President Laurent Kabila was assassinated in 2001. Nobody knew who would run the country or whether civil war would break out. Kabila’s son, Joseph, declared himself president. People were afraid. Kenneth was afraid.

After years of civil war, what would this self-appointed president do?

Life in the Congo easily erupts into chaos. Just this month, bloody battles broke out.

Things here in America, on this beach, in this charming city, are so different.
"Here, you have organization. You can go to the store and buy some tools or other things with a card. In the Congo, this isn't possible," he explains.

Here, so many things are possible for them.

They'll start public school this fall. They'll master English and make new friends. They'll learn about America from their textbooks and about Charleston from the influences of their new peers. They'll learn their father's rules.

And maybe one day soon, their mother and oldest sister will join them. Maybe they, too, will feel the hospitality and gaze out over the wide blue ocean that still separates them on this Father's Day.