

DAVIDSON

5/18/03

# Eclectic worship service aims to close racial gaps

By BRIAN LEWIS  
Staff Writer

When the Rev. Tony Evans begins his sermon tonight at the Gaylord Entertainment Center, he'll be preaching to an audience the likes of which aren't seen most Sunday mornings in area churches.

By design, the Gathering is one of the most diverse and eclectic worship experiences each year in Middle Tennessee. It is meant to help create an appreciation for diversity and build bridges across racial and denominational barriers.

Organizers and attendees say that since the event started in 2000, it has gotten closer each year to its goal of diversity and unity. While some believe that events such as this do not go far enough toward creating an appreciation of diverse backgrounds, all involved see it as a positive first step toward improving the community.

"I think the Gathering is incredibly moving," said Carol Pitman, a member of Word of Faith Christian Center, a multiracial church on Nolensville Pike.

The first Gathering drew 7,500 people to the Gaylord Entertainment Center. That almost doubled last year, when more than 13,000 people attended the event some organizers said was as diverse as the city of Nashville.

This year's event starts at 5 p.m. at the arena. As in years past, an offering will be collected, and all proceeds will go to a local charity. The name of the charity will be announced tonight.

Since the beginning, organizers have deliberately attempted to attract a diverse audience.

"If Christians don't attempt to address racism and ethnic divisions, where will that begin?" said Rubel Shelly, of Woodmont Hills Church of Christ on Franklin Pike. "Our theology commits us to battling racism, and we

have to begin walking the talk in a very aggressive way."

The event has drawn a more diverse audience each year, Shelly said. Worshippers will hear a wide range of musical styles, Shelly said, from country gospel to Spanish to African-American church music.

"There will be an attempt to touch on the kinds of music and worship traditions represented in the audience," he said. "It will not be all of one sort."

For Alicia Griffin, a Mexican immigrant who has lived in Nashville since 1985, the Gathering is an event at which race does not matter. "I see myself as a Christian that is part of worship service, not as a Hispanic or as a woman," said Griffin, a member of Belmont Church. A dentist, Griffin said she has never experienced racism.

"Maybe (it's) because I'm a professional person. I've never felt like a foreigner."

For many minorities, however, that experience is not reality.

The Rev. Andrew Stephens, pastor of the Village Church, a predominantly black congregation in east Nashville, said he thinks the event will be successful in drawing a diverse crowd. But he worries that often people who say race does not matter do not fully grasp the complexity of the issue.

"The whole problem I have is it falls short of addressing the race problem that remains in America and it tries to ... through positive thinking pretend it's not there. I'm unable to do that kind of positive thinking as I look at the inequities that continue to exist in public schools, and when I look at the Juvenile Justice Center just full of black kids."

The Rev. Enoch Fuzz of the predominantly black Corinthian Missionary Baptist Church, however, said Operation Andrew, the group that sponsors the Gathering has done a lot to

build bridges between black and white congregations.

"The Gathering becomes a celebration of a year's worth of work," Fuzz said. He added that many people speak of heaven as a place where there will be no racial divisions and the Gathering "becomes kind of like to the best of our ability a glimpse of what heaven will be like — a house of prayer for all people regardless of their race or denomination."

It is important, Fuzz said, for the church to lead the way in working for racial unity because for many years churches dragged their feet on the issue of racial equality.

"The church was the hiding place of those people, especially in the South, who did not want to be a part of desegregation. Those people who wanted to hold on to the segregated society retreated to their suburban churches."

Now, many pastors say, that kind of thinking is unacceptable at almost every congregation.

"We're never going to have the kind of community that we want to have as long as we allow bigotry and hatred and prejudice to build walls between us," said the Rev. L.H. Hardwick of Christ Church in Antioch. "Of all the institutions in the country, the church ought to be doing everything it can ... to work against those artificial barriers towards unity."

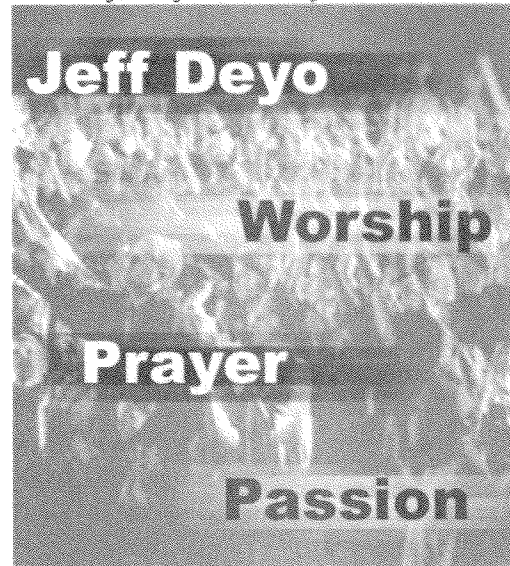
And for people like Pitman of Word of Faith Christian Center, the Gathering is a great opportunity to experience the unity that being a Christian is supposed to be all about.

"I think the Gathering is incredibly moving. Last year, we were grieved because that place should have been filled to capacity, and it was not." ■

Brian Lewis writes about religion, faith and values. He can be reached at 259-8077 or [brlewis@tennessean.com](mailto:brlewis@tennessean.com).

## Youth Worship Gathering

Pre-event to "The Gathering" - 6:00pm  
Sunday, May 18 w/Tony Evans @ GEC



# FREE

Tuesday, May 6, 2003

7:00 - 8:30 pm

Rockettown

401 6th Ave

Downtown Nashville

615.889.8808