



Mamadou Sawa Bih

THIS IS HOW WE CAN DO CHURCH

Chicago church connects with the community

An interview with Erma Purnell and Mary Scott-Boria by Heidi Gross

When First Church of the Brethren in Chicago hosted a dramatic performance last spring, church members renewed connections with people who had grown up in the community.

The show was *Ladies Ring Shout 2.0*, by Honey Pot Performance, a Chicago-based collective of Black women. Their performances incorporate spoken word, music, movement, images, and video. *Ladies Ring Shout 2.0* focuses on themes critical to Black women's lives such as representation, love and relationships, scars/trauma, work-life balance, quality of life, nurturing and parenting, spirituality, healing, and defining communities of care.

Heidi Gross interviewed fellow church members Erma Purnell and

Mary Scott-Boria about the performance and the group's involvement with First Church. Purnell and Scott-Boria have each been members of the congregation for decades. They raised their children there, and many of their children and grandchildren are members.

Heidi Gross: What are some moments that stood out to you?

Erma Purnell: I liked the white outfits that they dressed in. There was so much singing. It all took you way back, and then brought you back to the present. I grew up in Mississippi, and a lot of the child's songs and games in the performance reminded me of my childhood in Mississippi.

Mary Scott-Boria: I liked all of it, but I really liked the beginning where



Erma Purnell

Kerry Brown



Mary Scott-Boria

Kerry Brown



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the women each individually came out and they were moaning. It reminded me of childbirth. And then, at the end, they did a piece that was playful and joyful. The final part of the performance ended with moaning and so it was sort of like a mourning.

The pianist had the most glorious, deep voice, and I resonate with her because my voice is very deep too. I'm like an alto, almost tenor, now. And her voice. She was one of the smallest actresses, but had this really deep, very soulful voice. I love the fact that she had command of that piano.

Gross: What does it mean to you that we were able to host that performance here in our space?

Purnell: It was nice to get people who don't know about the church in

this community to see what kind of things are happening here. Hopefully we can continue to interest the community in what's going on here now. Who knows, we might end up getting some weddings or something!

Scott-Boria: They gave honor to us several times. They were so respectful of the space.

They also used our stained-glass windows in a unique way. For example, at one point the women were like

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shadow puppet-type things in the windows. They projected the windows in a faded way on this wall and then had these black shadows of the women doing children’s songs, and it was really a beautiful scene. It was very womanist [Black feminist] performance. It was sort of a timeline in terms of genealogy and ancestry. It kind of flowed, and that felt very spiritual.

And then the other thing that was a very spiritual moment was when Meida [McNeal], the director of the play, did a piece about her mother and spoke about her relationship with her mother particularly at the time when her mother died. It all flowed very seamlessly, from these moments of mourning to funny moments.

I think being in the church gave people the idea that church is not just a place for some people, but a place for all

people. You don’t have to stick with the time-tested rituals—you can do unique, creative things in the church and people still feel the spiritual moment. I thought that was really important.

Gross: How did this group get connected with First Church originally?

Scott-Boria: Well, a few years ago I went to a performance about Martin Luther King that Meida and Abra [Johnson, co-founders of Honey Pot Performance] had created. Meida grew up in this neighborhood where our church is, and her parents met in this neighborhood. So she has these very fond memories of growing up here and living here. She did the Martin Luther King one-woman performance in honor of her time in this community and her parents’ time in this community.

When I saw her performance about King, I approached her and said, “Look, we hosted King at our church during his time in Chicago, and wouldn’t you like to do that performance at our church?” Originally she was going to do that performance here. But this play, Ladies Ring Shout 2.0, was about 10 years in the making, and they wanted to finalize it. So that’s how it all came together.

Gross: Maybe she’ll still do the Martin Luther King one in the future?


Scott-Boria: Yes, she’s still working on that. That one would have come with a weekend of workshops about the East Garfield Park neighborhood. That was supposed to happen in April 2020, and it got canceled because of the pandemic. But we still plan to do it in the future.

Gross: Do you have any other reflections?

Purnell: They decorations are marvelous. So beautiful. The sanctuary is transformed. They did really creative things with this space.

Scott-Boria: I saw the brother of one of the co-writers of this performance. When he was a child, he did performances of the “I Have a Dream” speech, and I recognized him from that time. I welcomed him and he said, “We’ve been to this church before.” So there were several people who said that they been to this church in the past. Hosting this performance brought back a lot of people who have connections to First Church.

Gross: So this was a way to remind them that we’re here, remind them of the memories that they’ve had from here, and reconnect with them.

Scott-Boria: And this is how we can do church. We can do church like this. 

Heidi Gross, a member of First Church of the Brethren in Chicago, is managing editor of Brethren Press.

