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Concert To Feature Belarus Choir

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By Annabeth Miller, SMT Editor

Among the nations of the world, Belarus is old – and yet young. With a history that dates back to the Russian Empire and the Kingdom of Poland, Belarus emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union to become an independent republic.

A unique taste of the nation's historic European culture will be featured Thursday evening when the Belarus National Christian Choir will be in concert at Dexter's First Baptist Church. The concert will begin at 6:30 p.m., and is free and open to the public.

The choir includes 28 vocalists and a string quartet and is in the middle of a concert tour throughout the south and mid-south. Rich Lee, minister of music at Dexter's First Baptist Church, is travelling with the choir on its tour.

Lee says he first became acquainted with the musical group in 2007 when he was serving at a church near Kansas City. He has since made three trips to Belarus, gotten to know choir personnel, and is excited to bring the group to Dexter.

"It's been an exciting trip," Lee said in a telephone interview from Alabama on Monday evening. He's driving one of the tour busses, and his son Joshua, age 12, is along on the journey and helping his dad and the choir.

"I know the choir and they know me. They are all so genuine and humble," Lee said. Most choir members, he said, do not speak fluent English. Along the journey, choir members are staying in homes of local residents, getting to better know American culture.

Lee says Christianity is just beginning to emerge from the days of Soviet communism.

“There were no churches in Belarus except the Russian Orthodox Church during the Soviet days,” Lee said. He said following the emergence of Belarus as an independent country, church groups and denominations in America began to assist the fledgling Christian community in the country.

“Missouri Baptists took an active role in helping,” he said. Even today though, he said that there are only approximately 200 non-orthodox churches for a country with a population of 9.6 million people.

“Christianity as we know Christianity is still looked upon by many as a cult,” he said. “Many feel that God must be like the Soviet rulers to which they are accustomed; that God must rule with 'an iron fist' instead of being a loving God.”

Thursday's concert will include a variety of selections, including a few hymns that the choir sings in English.

“The concert will be mostly in Russian with some religious and some (Belarus) folk music,” he said. The group is accompanied on several selections by a string quartet.

Lee said that earlier this fall, he taught the Dexter First Baptist Church choir two numbers in Russian, and they will join the Belarusian guests for two numbers in Thursday's concert.

Formed in 1986, the choir has performed in Eastern Europe, France, Germany and Russia and is currently making its fifth tour to the United States. Nickolay Lamako, dean of music at Minsk Seminary, is the founder and conductor of the choir. An offering will be taken at the end of the performance.

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