

Poetry is a ministry for Gretna-based group

Sunday night events encourage expression

By Aaron Wilkinson

Contributing writer

For most, the word poetry is likely to conjure up images of Robert Frost or William Wordsworth, roaming forests and hillsides lost in solitary contemplation.

But for the members of Choice International Ministries, a Gretna-based nonprofit group focused largely on musical ministry, it is a far more public affair.

Over the past six months the group has held open poetry nights on Sundays at various locations, rotating between the Holiday Inn in Gretna and other venues in Kenner, La Place and Reserve. The nights usually begin with a performance by Choice, the gospel ensemble out of which CIM evolved.

From there, performers who have signed up to participate are invited to recite poems, improvise spoken word performances, sing, dance and generally express themselves in their chosen artistic format. The only rules protect against profanity, and the performances have become a popular part of the group's ministry, often attracting 100 to 200 attendees, said the Rev. Antoine Jasmine, CIM director.

"People love it because it's different," he said. "A lot of people have heard of poetry but haven't seen spoken word live and in color. It allows Christians of all denominations to have fun outside of church."

Jasmine and the original members of Choice founded the musical group in 1997 as a fun opportunity for musical fellowship between friends of different denominations. As their outreach efforts expanded, they began to travel the country, giving musical performances and clinics in cities throughout the South and as far away as Michigan.

The group eventually founded a musical academy as well, now headquartered at 621 Franklin St. in Gretna. From there members stage weekly clinics at local churches, teaching the basics of musical theory, sharing chord progressions, giving voice lessons and serving any other requests for musical development.

"We all came together to form one unit, which is a mobile ministry," Jasmine said. "We didn't want to limit ourselves to inside the four walls of the church. We want to reach everybody, not just one particular group of people."

In the coming year, the group hopes to form a record label to develop and promote talent it identifies through its ministry, Jasmine said. It also will continue to put on the poetry nights after taking a break during the holiday season, he added.

"Because we're an outreach ministry, this reaches out to the community, to people of various ethnic backgrounds," he said. "Part of our mission is to reach people who might not ordinarily go to church but will come to a poetry reading."