

Why Is Nissan 'Manufacturing' A Gospel Choir?

Maria Burnham, Associated Press Writer

CANTON, Miss. (AP) — Automobile plants make a lot of noise with welding, stamping and paint machines. But at the Madison County Nissan plant, the new sound is the joyful kind.

The plant's three-month old gospel choir has performed for company executives, state officials and the local community.

"It's a little different," said Jeffrey Webster, the facility's director of human resources and the choir's director. "Sure, we have some basketball teams and fishing clubs and that sort of thing. And sure, a choir is different, but it speaks to the diversity of the team we have here at Nissan."

The 13-member choir, including musicians on keyboard and guitars, performs traditional and modern gospel music. It was initially put together as part of a black history month program. The group was an instant hit, and is fast becoming a part of the plant's culture.

"It was surprising, a lot better than people expected," Webster said. "It was the first time they had heard some of their co-workers singing."

Choir members come from different operations and shifts at the 3.5 million-square-foot plant. They are technicians and salaried employees. A few had worked as professional musicians; most sang in their church choirs. All share a love of singing.

"I've been pretty much singing all my life," said Reggie Jones of Maben, who works in the Altima body shop.

Jones says singing with the choir has been a great way to meet co-workers and make friends. "It builds relationships," he said. "This plant is so big, you hardly see anyone."

That's one of the advantages to such company-sponsored extracurricular activities, said Markus Baer, assistant professor of organizational behavior at Washington University in St. Louis.

In large plants — the Canton facility employs about 3,400 — people work in a specific unit and tend to identify themselves with it, he said. They don't often interact with workers outside their departments.

Activities that bring people together socially help break down those barriers, Baer said.

"It builds a very strong sense of identity," Baer said. "It helps people see the

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workplace as more than a pure exchange of my energy for compensation."

Employee interaction across units can also lead to innovative new ideas for the company, as talk turns to workplace issues, he said.

It also means employees are less likely to shirk their duties, if they know how the work they're doing affects others, said Kristin Byron, an assistant professor of management at Syracuse University.

"It bonds the employees together, but also to the company," she said. "They'll feel more committed when they feel bonded to the work place."

Members of Nissan's choir feel they have a strong bond with one another, and they also sing Nissan's praises, figuratively at least, for putting the choir together.

"This is one of the very good things that Nissan has done," said Marshel Lewis, of McComb, who works in the commercial van paint plant and sings in the choir. "You just don't see companies doing that."

While unusual, gospel choirs aren't unheard of in large corporations. Sears Holdings' Associate Gospel Choir has been around since 1996, recorded a CD and has been featured in national commercials for the retailer.

Members of the Nissan choir could see their own group doing that someday.

"I know most professional choirs that don't sound this good," said Fredrick Bell, a Terry resident who grew up in a musical family. In addition to singing, Bell plays bass guitar for the choir. He also has worked as a professional blues musician, playing with Bobby Rush, among others.

The choir doesn't have firm plans for its future, Webster said, but opportunities have been discussed.

"This was just fun," said Bell, who works in the Altima paint plant and was recruited into the choir after someone heard him singing while working on the line.

"The way we just came together — we just clicked from the beginning."

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