

ASKING THE CLERGY

act two

The role of the arts in your faith

BY JIM MERRITT

Special to Newsday

African Americans and the Arts” is the theme of this February’s celebration of Black History Month. This week’s clergy discuss the role played by music, dance, the spoken word and other art forms in their services and faith communities.

THE REV. OMOTAYO COLE CINEUS

Pastor, Salem African Methodist Episcopal Church, Roslyn Heights

One of the most beautiful expressions of love toward God is through the arts. Choirs, liturgical dancers, spoken word artists, musicians and more help to usher members into the experience of worship and offer praise to God. So many churches invest time, talent and finances into supporting the many who find their passion for ministry through movement and song. Salem AME, a growing congregation, opens the doors and welcomes all with praise and worship to God through hymns, traditional and contemporary gospel. For instance, Salem AME Roslyn will celebrate Black History Month on Feb. 25 through music, dance, worship, praise and the preached word. Our members can also

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the arts bring beauty and joy into our faith.

ASHLEIGH HARRISON

Minister in Training Over Spoken Word, Grace Cathedral International, Uniondale

Art is a cornerstone in faith communities. Exodus 15:1 states, “Moses and the people of Israel sang this song to the Lord,” emphasizing God’s desire for believers to be in community. Poetry is an extension of faith-based art. Many of David’s psalms were written to be accompanied by instruments, but the potency was in the words. David could string together words that moved people’s hearts and linked them through language and nuance. Poetry reveals the inner workings of one’s spirit and highlights the yearnings that worldly vices cannot fulfill. Dance is the full overtaking of belief in one’s physical being to express what words and sounds do not. It represents the rejection of stagnation and the discomfort of change. Twisting, bending and leaping represent what believers must do on their spiritual journey. All forms of artistic expression unite faith communities by making messages universal. At Grace Cathedral, our Levitical Team, Praise Dance Ministry and Spoken Word Ministry use the arts to express communal gratitude and fellowship. Some don’t feel gifted to perform, but all are gifted to absorb artistically. We are born with a measure of faith that ordains us to ingest art through fellowship and see God as a multidimensional Savior.

be heard praying and lamenting to the soft sounds of our organ, accompanied by the hums of fellowship. The opportunity for our youth to dance to songs of praise with movements that may mimic Twyla Tharp, Alvin Ailey or the latest TikTok craze provide an opportunity for them to express their awareness, knowledge and love of the Triune God. May it be the swaying and clapping of seniors or the rhythm of the preached word, the arts thrive and feed the souls of so many in the AME Church.

THE REV. NATALIE M. FENIMORE

Lead minister and minister of Lifespan Religious Education, Unitarian Universalist Congregation at Shelter Rock, Manhasset

Our congregation is blessed with a beautiful physical location: a large, wooded campus. We enhance this beauty by bringing art into the worship

space. Each Sunday there are spectacular flower arrangements provided by one of our members. The flowers bring the outside in and connect our worship to the larger creation of which we are a part. There is an art gallery filled with the works of artists from the community. The walls of the building are filled with art created by our members, which they share with others to uplift us all. Art is a way to communicate and focus spiritual insights. Art can reinforce human connections and commonality. It also challenges us to see a variety of perspectives. This openness to diverse views is important to our faith tradition. Music is central to our worship. We know that music can provide emotional expression and release — and stir the soul. As with the songs of the civil rights movement, the hymns we sing empower us to envision freedom, peace and justice. The gifts of