

# SISTERS SPEAK!

A NEWSLETTER PUBLISHED BY THE SISTERS CHAPEL  
WISDOM CENTER

*Sponsored by the Lilly Endowment*

*WISDOM Center opens with visions to “Reclaim, Revive and Revolutionize” spiritual and religious life at Spelman*

The weekend of January 29 - February 1, 2004 marked a historic weekend as the Spelman College community celebrated the launching of the Sisters Center for WISDOM (Women in Spiritual Discernment of Ministry). As Sisters Chapel seeks to bring forth its vision to reclaim, revive, and revolutionize the spiritual and religious life of the College, the Sisters Center for WISDOM supports this vision by existing as a space dedicated to vocational and spiritual reflection.

The WISDOM Center launch festivities included a Sisters Speak Convocation, which featured a roundtable discussion about spirituality and vocation by members of the Spelman faculty, student body, and Spelman alumnae. The weekend also included a meditation class conducted by Dr. Veta Goler, chair of the Department of Drama and Dance, a Performing Arts Showcase and a Symposium on “Spirituality, Career & Calling,” which included presentations by Dr. Soraya Mekerta, associate professor of foreign languages, Dr. Marla Frederick, C’94, assistant professor of religion and African American studies at Harvard University, and Dr. Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, director of the African American Studies Program at Colby College. The weekend ended with an awards luncheon and a Sunday Worship Service that included the Rev. Dr. Jo Ann Browning and Bishop Vashti McKenzie, respectively, as distinguished speakers.

FALL 2004

*Spirituality is so central to scholarship on women’s culture and women’s liberation that we can’t discuss liberation or empowerment without also discussing women’s spirituality.*

-Dilla Buckner in an interview with Margaret Walker Alexander from *My Soul is a Witness: African American Women’s Spirituality*

*Daughters of the Covenant Program offers students mentoring and vocational reflection*

*By Jessica B. Davenport, C’04*



Vocation, career, faith, and calling were the topics of the summer for eight Spelman students as they participated in the Daughters of the Covenant Program, an initiative conceived by the Sisters Chapel WISDOM Center. The program, an intensive six-week mentoring and leadership development experience, gave the students the opportunity to reflect upon ways that their faith informs their vocation and career choices. Through the program, students interested in ordained or church related ministry, theological and ethical scholarship, or non-religious vocations received internship experience as they worked and developed meaningful mentoring relationships with women who have careers in the students’ respective area of interest and who have visibly made a connection between their spiritual formation and their vocational choices.

After working with Chaplain Gayle Jordan and the Aftercare Prison Ministries at the Georgia Department of Corrections, junior religion and psychology double major Ashley Coleman feels compelled to do further research on the dynamics of prison populations and other marginalized groups in society. The Aftercare Prison Ministries program  
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## WORDS FROM THE DIRECTOR



Rev. Lisa D. Rhodes

Welcome to the first issue of *Sisters Speak*, the voice of and about women of faith and the experiences and programs that encourage theological reflection and support spiritual formation. Through this bi-annual newsletter, *Sisters Speak* will highlight the ongoing activities and programs sponsored by the newly established Sisters Center for WISDOM (Women in Spiritual Discernment of

Ministry), a Sisters Chapel initiative funded by the Lilly Endowment, Inc. This project was publicly launched in January 2004 with the official re-opening of the Bessie Strong Residential Hall, home to the Sisters Chapel staff and Spelman women residents committed to understanding what role faith plays in vocational discernment, scholarship and community service.

Designed to strengthen the Sisters Chapel infrastructure, the Sisters Center for WISDOM seeks to support the Chapel's vision to **Reclaim, Revive, and Revolutionize** the religious and spiritual life at Spelman College. The need to bring this vision to fruition is critical for several reasons: the Black Church must embrace and address the sociopolitical realities of young Black America including AIDS, violence, public health disparities and an extreme sense of hopelessness; Black religious life must listen to and hear the new voices of Black culture spoken through creative expressions characteristic of "Holy" Hip Hop, while maintaining the sacred music traditions of the spirituals, anthems and hymns; Black faith communities must reconcile their differences and build a "beloved community" that affirms, accepts and celebrates the rich diversity of a pluralistic culture and world. Sisters Chapel and its WISDOM initiative have entered the new millennium for *such a time as this*; a time to **reclaim** the spiritual and religious heritage of its founding as the Atlanta Baptist Seminary; **revive** the spiritual and physical presence, voice and leadership role of women of African descent; and **revolutionize** the mission of religious and spiritual life at Spelman College with a global vision of social justice, religious freedom, and world peace.

We are committed to supporting the number of women seeking training and preparation for religious and spiritual leadership. The Lilly Endowment, the radical revision of the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, the relatively recent hire of Dr. Rosetta Ross as chair of the department, and the appointment of Dr. Renita Weems as the Camille Cosby Chair in the Humanities, are all helping to bring this vision to fulfillment. In two years, the number of Spelman women majoring in religion has increased from six in 2002 to 15 in 2004. We look forward to the rising tide of women of African descent and their contributions to Black religious life and culture. On January 27, 2005, we look forward to the celebration and rededication of the newly renovated Sisters Chapel, the heart and soul of Spelman College, and the sacred space that will bring this vision to life. Read through this newsletter and hear *Sisters Speak*.

### *Covenant, Continued.*

is designed to assist inmates with finding housing and jobs once they are released from prison. During her six-week internship, Ashley also reflected upon her experience each week with Chaplain Jordan, who is also the coordinator of the Aftercare

Prison Ministries program. Through these reflective sessions, Ashley not only formed a strong bond with Chaplain Jordan, but she also received vocational insight as she considers pursuing a career as a professor and minister. To Ashley, the Daughters of the Covenant experience was a "transforming" one that has left her with a renewed sense of spirituality and calling.

"Through my weekly journals, assigned readings, and conversations with Ms. Sanders, I learned to fully appreciate and understand the gifts that God gave me. It is these gifts and talents that will fuel my passion for journalism and creative writing."

-Khaliyah Fleming '05  
Daughters of the Covenant Class of '04

"It wasn't until I read Let Your Life Speak by Parker Palmer that I started to come to terms with my inner self. I began to listen for guidance from within, and just as Palmer stated, I began to ask myself, 'What is my life telling me to do?'"

-Latia Taliaferro '05  
Daughters of the Covenant Class of '04

Senior religion major and Gateway student Maxine Thompson spent her summer at the Zion Hill Community Development Corporation (CDC) where she worked with the organization's New Beginnings Program, an initiative designed to assist homeless women in

achieving economic success. Through working with the program and having weekly reflective discussions with her mentor, the Rev. Melanie Conner, who is also the Executive Director of the Zion Hill CDC, Maxine was able to come to what she refers to as her "great realization," the point when she was able to empathize with the suffering of the women at the Center. According to Maxine, "I saw myself in these women." Maxine looks forward to furthering her study of religion by looking at the sociological aspects of faith communities.

Other participants in the Daughters of the Covenant Program were Juanice Smith, Marissa Little, Candace Duckett, Khaliyah Fleming, Jessica Davenport and Latia Taliaferro.

### *WISDOM Center produces Young Voices of Scholarship*

Designed to cultivate young black women in scholarship, the Sisters Chapel Scholars Program supports the development of Spelman students with clearly defined interests in religion, scholarship, research, and service. Through the program, students are required to work on specific Sisters Chapel WISDOM Center projects related to her personal research interests on issues effecting women of the African Diaspora. Scholars are also required to give 10 hours of community service in an area of their research topic.

Scholar Tiana Blount, C'05, an environmental science major, looks forward to researching the effects of environmental health on minority communities and specifically, women of African descent. Intrigued by issues of environmental justice and

See *Scholar*, Next Page

*Scholar, Cont.*

health issues, Tiana would like to enhance awareness about the link between a healthy environment and the well being of African American women through her research.

Senior Political Science major Fallon Wilson is looking to contribute to the body of research concerning women's reproductive health by doing research on the reproductive rights of minority women. Fallon hopes that her research will help to expose the reproductive laws and issues of race, class, and gender that result in a cycle of adverse effects on African American women and their rights to reproductive choice.

Seeking to further explore Womanist Theology, junior religion major Meredith Coleman-Tobias is using the Sisters Chapel Scholars Program as an opportunity to research the Christology of young black women. Meredith hopes to contribute to the works of Delores Williams, Jacquelyn Grant, and other womanist theologians by researching ways that young black women can use womanist theology to construct an empowering Christology in the context of today's culture.

Along with Tiana, Fallon, and Meredith, Ann Lister, C'06, and Jamila Little, C'05, make up the first class of Sisters Chapel Scholars.

*Under new department chair, Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies undergoes major revisions*

The revisions to the Religion and Philosophy Department have included major changes to the entire Department: the faculty, the curriculum, even the Department's title. Now called the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, the Department will offer courses that will not only cover Christian theology, but various religious traditions including those practiced in Africa and by Native Americans. Religion majors will be required to take courses in three Curricular Areas: Sacred Texts, History of Religions, and Religion and Culture. Such courses as Religion and Violence Against Women, Introduction to Black Theology, and Women in Islam are just a few of the new courses offered this fall.

In addition to the curriculum revisions, the Department has also hired two new faculty members. Dr. Jamilla Karim, an Islamacist, and Dr. Nami Kim, whose focus is in Christianity and Asian religious traditions, will both bring new insights and expertise to the Department and to the Spelman community.

And the revisions do not stop there. The Philosophy curriculum is also being reviewed and major revisions are forthcoming.

*The Sisters Chapel WISDOM Center would like to welcome Dr. Renita Weems back for her second year as Cosby Endowed Professor for the Humanities. Dr. Weems is teaching Introduction to the New Testament this fall.*

**Mark your calendar for these upcoming  
WISDOM Center Fall Semester Events:**

**September**

21 Interfaith Hour: Islam WISDOM Center 5:00 PM

**October**

1-2 Leadership Dev. & Spiritual Retreat Calloway Gardens overnight  
Featuring Dr. Renita Weems

3 Installation of Chapel Assistants Cosby Auditorium 10:00 AM

19 Interfaith Hour: Baha'i WISDOM Center 5:00 PM

**November**

11-14 Praise Fest 2004 Cosby Auditorium 7PM Nightly  
Featuring the Rev. Claudette Copeland

16 Interfaith Hour: Hinduism WISDOM Center 5:00 PM

17 Candlelight Service of Remembrance

**December**

1 Interfaith hour: Protestantism WISDOM Center 5:00 PM

5 Advent Worship Service Cosby Auditorium 10:00 AM

Sisters Chapel  
Services and Events  
Available on Audio  
[CD and Video](#)

Opening Worship  
Service 2003

Praise Fest 2003

WISDOM Center  
Launch Events

Opening Worship  
Service 2004

*To purchase, contact  
Sisters Chapel  
404-270-5729*

## SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Below is a list of suggested reading materials pertaining to vocation, spirituality and African American women:

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- Parker, Evelyn. *Trouble Don't Last Always: Emancipatory Hope Among African American Adolescents*. Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2003.
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### *Sisters Chapel WISDOM Center Announces Faculty Mini-Grant Recipients*



**Dr. Ross**

In April 2004, the Sisters Chapel WISDOM Center awarded two course development mini-grants to members of the Spelman College faculty as a way to further stimulate critical and creative thinking about theology of vocation and ministry. Through funding from the grants, faculty will be provided with research support to develop an interdisciplinary curriculum that focuses on engaging students in the discussion of issues related to women and religion, spirituality and faith, and religious diversity.

Dr. Rosetta Ross, associate professor and chair of the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, and Dr. Alma Jean Billingslea-Brown, associate professor of english, were awarded a mini-grant to develop a new course entitled *Black Women, Spirituality, and Activism*. The course will focus on exploring the definitive link between service, social change and relationship to the transcendent. Using autobiography, fiction and prose narrative by African-descended women, students in the course will identify ways in which the interpersonal relationships, the vocation and avocations, the cultural and community work of activists reflect a world view shaped by spirituality. The course also has a service-learning component that will enable students to work at various locations, including homeless shelters, women's shelters and prisons.



**Dr. Pavri**



**Dr. Brown**

Dr. Tinaz Pavri, Associate Professor and Chair of the Political Science Department, was awarded a mini-grant to revise an existing course entitled *Human Rights and Conflict Resolution*, which examines the proliferation of conflicts, particularly ethno-nationalist and ethno-religious conflicts across the world and attempts to understand their root causes and factors promoting their resolution. The grant will be used to further research on the religious and spiritual underpinnings of conflict resolution. Specifically, the course will give students the opportunity to analyze a case study of Tibet to see how a culture rooted in the Buddhist faith and built around peace and consensus has responded to Chinese aggression. Students will also explore the ways in which the world's religions have spoken on the issues of human rights.

## CALL AND RESPONSE: We Are the Ones We Are Waiting For!

By Rev. Melva L. Sampson

This past June, I traveled to the West Coast of Africa to Accra, Kumasi, and Cape Coast Ghana with Emory University's Candler School of Theology Black Church Studies Program. Along with a group of seminarians, Christian clergy, and academicians, we were engaged and enlightened by various African professors and historians on the politics, culture, and religion of the region. This article was written as a reflection of the sacred experience at the Elmina Castle.

*The waves crash against the base of Elmina Castle. They are loud like clanging symbols. While an act of nature, I wonder if it is the voices of the ancestors calling through the currents? If they could speak, what would they say?* **Journal Entry June 17, 2004**

Elmina Castle built by the Portuguese in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, later controlled by the Dutch and finally the British until 1948. The tour guide was candid in his description of the female slave living quarters. Two small rectangular openings used as ventilation and two buckets in each corner used for waste. No rags provided for menses and slave girls and women were paraded in the governor's courtyard to be sexually, physically and emotionally violated. Rage is the emotion I felt as I walked through each cell. As I touched the original brick and wrapped myself in the smell of damp cement and salt water, I wept for my ancestors. I wept for those who unassumingly sold their families, tribe members and enemies. I wept for the 40 million that either died on the journey from the inland to the castles or on the middle passage. Our guide and driver, Morgan kept telling me to take heart and be strong but even the strongest person cannot contain his or her emotion at first glance—Black women commodified to the highest degree.

What has really changed? Black women scantily clad paraded in front of men who saw them not as mothers, royalty, warriors, chief priestesses and nurturers of whole communities, but only as objects of pleasure and exploitation. What has really changed when tacit approval is given to particular genres of music, which display a pervasive discontent that response to misogynistic rap lyrics that continue to tification and sexual harassment by the well respected would the ancestors say? I believe they are speaking particular Black women, to soar beyond the psycholonger enslaved physically, we are still bound emotionally we are bound by economic deprivation, sotioned by institutions that are deemed to be most



My travel companions and other tourists pass through knees and tears, like Mother Nature's release during a hear my own sobs of discontent. Yet in the midst of this moment of reflection on the slave narrative I find revelation, I find hope, and I find creative resistance in the shape and form of those who also heard the waves clanging like symbols and in their own context heard the ancestors speaking. "What am I to do?" I quietly ask. The walls are silent but my Spirit is screaming, "What is your response?" I get it! My task is to respond! And so as a young Black woman emerging in religious leadership I answer the call and respond in the Spirit of those who speak from the floors of the sea and the dust of the earth. I remain quiet for a few more moments. I ask myself, "What are you waiting for?" I respond, "Guidance, direction, someone to show me the way." My spirit asks, "What if we (as in Black women) are the one's we've been waiting for?"

the cell and I remain hunched down with my head on my heavy storm, roll down my face. It is quiet and I can only hear my own sobs of discontent. Yet in the midst of this moment of reflection on the slave narrative I find revelation, I find hope, and I find creative resistance in the shape and form of those who also heard the waves clanging like symbols and in their own context heard the ancestors speaking. "What am I to do?" I quietly ask. The walls are silent but my Spirit is screaming, "What is your response?" I get it! My task is to respond! And so as a young Black woman emerging in religious leadership I answer the call and respond in the Spirit of those who speak from the floors of the sea and the dust of the earth. I remain quiet for a few more moments. I ask myself, "What are you waiting for?" I respond, "Guidance, direction, someone to show me the way." My spirit asks, "What if we (as in Black women) are the one's we've been waiting for?"

Such profound dialogue yielded the following words of poetic inspiration:

*We be the ones we waitin fo'! We are the ones we are waiting for to unlock and unravel the chains that have been wrapped so tightly around our creativity, our spirit, our tenacity and drive.*

*We be the ones! We are the ones to disarm the security alert that place Black women at the top of the most wanted list: wanted dead or alive!*

*We are the ones who have been given the power to ignite the passion of a people who haven been blinded by the bling of temporal success. Our dreams and hopes, are waiting for us to realize that We Be The Ones!*

*Yes! We be the ones we waitin fo'. Yes, we are the ones we are waiting for to charge through the doors, to unlock the goddess and god in each of us. Spirit has been waiting for us to get this point, this moment, this very time for us to move into our destiny, to reach back in herstory to grab hold to the dreams of our ancestors. To hear the muted voices rising from the grave looking to us Black women of all shapes and hues to save their legacy from being eternally buried, snuffed out, wiped out, and blacked out from our memory.*

*Oh how great it would be if we were the ones to put an end to what seems like a never-ending tragedy of oppression, degradation, and deprivation—if we were the ones to put an end to the constant trying of our sanity and our patience.*

In my sorority we sing a song that calls all active and non-active sisters to the floor for a time of ritual singing. We sing, "Calling all Deltas to the floor. We have some here but we need some more." It doesn't matter if it is a homecoming football game, a celebration of marriage, or a reunion of sorts, sorors begin to appear from all sides of the room, the field or space. They come because they are united by this call. And so, like the call of my sorority, I issue the clarion call for all women who are descendants of the Continent to come out to the floor. We have some here but we certainly need more. We need more women who will raise their voices, who will answer the call, who will respond to the voices traveling through the currents. Time has drawn nigh, it is our turn—we are the ones we are waiting for.

In the next issue of *Sister Speak!*

***The Reopening of Sisters Chapel***

## *Religious and Spirituality Survey Results Reflect Campus Spiritual Life*

*By Bruce Wade*

*Associate Professor of Sociology*

Questions of religious diversity, spiritual leadership, vocational “calling” and spiritual expression are big topics at this small liberal arts college for women (Spelman College). Just how to address the complex topics associated with questions of diversity on campus is an issue facing the Advisory Committee working with the Sisters Chapel Wisdom Center grant from the Lilly Endowment (funded December, 2002). During the fall semester of 2003–2004, members of the advisory committee conceived, designed and implemented a survey to assess campus beliefs, attitudes and practices associated with religion or spirituality. After receiving approval from the College Institutional Review Board, the survey was administered to samples of faculty, students and staff during the 2003–2004 academic year. The methodology involved the distribution of the questionnaire to faculty at a faculty meeting and to all other campus constituencies through e-mail solicitations and through the campus intranet.

**Sixty-six faculty members (46% of 145), 82 staff persons (25% of 328) and 385 students (19% of 2050) responded to the survey.** There was a high degree of similarity among the responses of faculty, staff and students to many of the survey items. In total, 533 (93% female) revealed surprising and not so surprising attitudes associated with religiosity and spirituality among a significant sector of the campus population.

The responses are broken down in terms of the overall sample (all respondents combined) and by particular sub-groups i.e., students, faculty and staff:

Approximately one third of the respondents attended spiritual or religious activities held on the campus:

*Do you participate in religious or spiritual activities on Spelman's campus?*

<b>OVERALL:</b>	<b>Yes = 32%</b>	<b>No = 45%</b>	<b>No but would like to = 22%</b>
<b>FACULTY</b>	<b>Yes = 27%</b>	<b>No = 56%</b>	<b>No but would like to = 17%</b>
<b>STUDENTS</b>	<b>Yes = 32%</b>	<b>No = 44%</b>	<b>No but would like to = 24%</b>
<b>STAFF</b>	<b>Yes = 41%</b>	<b>No = 39%</b>	<b>No but would like to = 20%</b>

Most of the respondents expressed a high degree of some form of spirituality.

*Do you consider yourself to be a spiritual person?*

<b>Overall response:</b>	<b>Yes = 82%</b>	<b>No = 7%</b>	<b>Not Sure = 11%</b>	<b>No response = 1%</b>
<b>Faculty:</b>	<b>Yes = 52 (81%)</b>			
<b>Students:</b>	<b>Yes = 309 (80%)</b>			

An overwhelming majority were concerned about discrimination against women in religious institutions. Somewhat surprisingly, the bias was perceived to be perpetuated by both men and women in these institutions.

*Do you think there is a bias against women being leaders in religious institutions or faith communities in general?*

<b>OVERALL:</b>			
Yes, by men only = 3.5%	Yes, by women only = 1%	Yes, by men and women = 70%	
No = 11%	Not sure = 14%		

*See Results Next page*

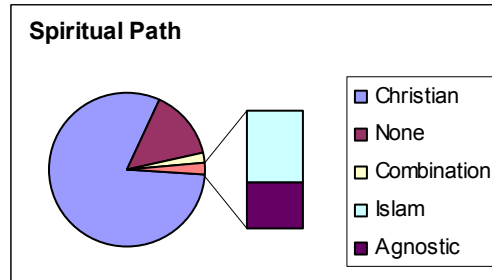
**Results Continued**

Other responses to select questions from the survey are as follows:

*What is your religion or spiritual path?*

OVERALL RESPONSE:

- Christian = 77%
- None = 14%
- Combination of traditions = 2%
- Islam = 1.6%
- Knowledge, purpose = 1%



*How often do you engage in the following religious and spiritual activities?*

OVERALL RESPONSES:

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <i>Worship service (mosque, church, temple)</i> | 60% = often; 22% = sometimes 4% = never |
| <i>Prayer (outside of worship service)</i>      | 73% often; 18% sometimes; 3% never      |
| <i>Meditation (for spiritual reasons)</i>       | 26% often; 28% sometimes ; 18% never    |
| <i>Yoga, Tai Chi or similar practice</i>        | 4% often; 10% sometimes ; 64% never     |
| <i>Read or study sacred texts</i>               | 34% often; 31% sometimes ; 8% never     |
| <i>Other readings on religion/spirituality</i>  | 23% often; 34% sometimes ; 11% never    |
| <i>Share your faith with others</i>             | 38% often; 42% sometimes ; 5% never     |

*Which of the following best characterizes your conception of or experience with God?*

OVERALL RESPONSES:

- |                                 |                          |              |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------|
| 6.7% = Universal spirit         | 14.9% = Higher Power     | 23.4% =Love  |
| 25.8% = Source of all existence | 2.4% = Divine Mystery    |              |
| 15.2% = Supreme Being           | 3.3% = None of the above | 5.6% = Other |

*How do you view God in relation to yourself? (survey participants were asked to check all that apply)*

OVERALL RESPONSES:

- |                       |                          |
|-----------------------|--------------------------|
| Father-figure= 49.4%  | Beloved = 39.9%          |
| Mother-figure = 25.5% | Master = 49.3%           |
| Friend = 49.3%        | Protector = 62.5%        |
| Teacher = 45.6%       | None of the above = 3.7% |
| Part of me = 53.5%    | Other = 12.4%            |

*Does/did religion or spirituality play a role in helping to choose your vocational/career path?*

- |                 |                  |                 |                       |
|-----------------|------------------|-----------------|-----------------------|
| <b>OVERALL:</b> | <b>Yes = 44%</b> | <b>No = 36%</b> | <b>Not sure = 19%</b> |
| <b>FACULTY</b>  | <b>Yes = 46%</b> | <b>No = 40%</b> | <b>Not sure = 14%</b> |
| <b>STUDENTS</b> | <b>Yes = 41%</b> | <b>No = 37%</b> | <b>Not sure = 22%</b> |
| <b>STAFF</b>    | <b>Yes = 57%</b> | <b>No = 33%</b> | <b>Not sure = 9%</b>  |

Seventy-nine percent of the staff, Sixty-three percent of faculty and fifty-three percent of students were fatalistic as to their current positions or roles on campus, i.e., they were “placed in a role by God or other forces.”

*Sisters Chapel Leadership  
Opportunities*

Mentoring and Leadership  
Development

Sisters Chapel Scholars Program  
Daughters of the Covenant Mentoring  
and Leadership Development Program  
Bessie Strong WISDOM Resident

Scholarship Opportunities

Finch Miller Scholarship  
Sisters Chapel Scholars Program  
Daughters of the Covenant Mentoring  
and Leadership Development Program

Program Development

Interfaith Hour Committee  
Women's Empowerment Programs  
Conversations for the Soul

Liturgical Leadership

Chapel Assistants Ministry  
Worship Committee

Performing Arts Ministry

Dance  
Drama  
Spoken Word  
Praise Team  
Sisters Chapel Choir

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