

# A beautiful sound of faith at Old Donation Episcopal Church

## VIRGINIA BEACH

The sound of the musical group Random Acts welcomes people to the Sunday evening service at Old Donation Episcopal Church.

It attracts parishioners and visitors through the contemporary music ministry. The sound is their ministry.

They rehearse together in the historic church for about an hour before segueing into the opening hymn. It is time for Mass when they have reached a crescendo in musicality.

Old Donation is the oldest church in what is today the modern city of Virginia Beach. Its first services were held in the home of Adam Thoroughgood in 1637, according to a church history, and the first church building was constructed on the land he owned in 1639, a spot later known as Church Point.

Today, Random Acts, a mini-orchestra and Americana musical group, brings modern sounds to Old Donation Episcopal Church. They are featured at "Paws, Prayers and Praise Service" some Sundays, and they're an uplifting respite every Sunday evening.

No matter the music genre, the group accomplishes its ministry by soothing souls through sound. The musicians' and singers' uplifting performance engulfs parishioners and visitors, accentuated by acoustics that resonate from a time before speakers were invented.

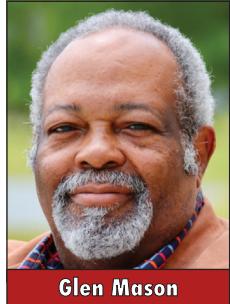
"Random Acts' musical style began by blending together folk, Christian rock, chant and traditional hymns," said the Rev. Robert "Bob" Randall, Old Donation's rector and minister of music.

"It has evolved each year as members of the band suggest we try new sounds," he told me. "We are a pretty open group, trusting God speaks to every person."

Random Acts sometimes even incorporates jazz and blues, making its interpretations creative.

Randall said he and his wife, Chris, select songs based upon themes related to preaching. Including the rector and his wife, both of whom sing and play guitar, there are 11 people in the group, and all of the volunteer musicians are from the parish.

"We knew we had people who loved to play and sing and wanted an opportunity to let their hearts and voices be free in praise and worship," Bob Randall said. "We



Glen Mason



John-Henry Doucette/The Indy

wanted to combine some of the good music that gave new life to the church in the 1970s and 80's, but also brand-new music that the Holy Spirit seemed to be introducing today.

"Our style became an eclectic, lively mix of great singable music," he added. "Every week, people tell us they left with an 'ear-worm' that keeps them lifted up all week."

The group includes singers Meredith Guzman, Barbara Schweiger, and Summer Johnson. On violin is Jeannie DeDominick, who also performs with the Virginia Symphony — and who plays with a transformative passion. On keyboards and piano is Martha Gentry.

Brennon Pope plays lead guitar, Greg Burroughs is on bass guitar, Ben Urquidi plays Djembe drum and guitar and the Rev. Rick Vinson is on the ukulele.

Burroughs, an instructor at the Virginia Beach School of Culinary Arts, has played in bands since he was 14.

He said "luck and timing" led to Random Acts becoming his ministry.

"I love Father Bob," Burroughs said. "He has that thoughtful empathy and helped me through some dark times. I had been playing in a local band, Chasing Corona. Father Bob knew about it, and he and Chris both played guitar, so he recruited me to work on a song for a service to add something a little different.

"It went over well, and eventually we started doing four or five songs for a Summer Service at 5 p.m.," Burroughs added, noting this was a bit more relaxed. "Come off the beach and get your God on before starting the week on Monday."

The best way to describe their sound is Americana gospel — or gospel music with an Americana veneer.

Randall said the 5 p.m. service is a welcoming environment for all.

"From the beginning, we said, 'Come as

you are,'" he said. "In fact, shorts, t-shirts, and sandals are the norm for summers — including for the clergy. I joke that it is rude to dress more nicely than the preacher, and I'm wearing shorts."

He added that he is grounded by Jesus' words to his disciples: "I no longer call you servants. Now I call you friends."

The service and its excellent sounds are a call for people to gather and celebrate. It's welcoming, and it just sounds plain good, too.

"When we rely too much on hierarchy," the pastor said, "we usually miss out on the blessings of the Christian community."

*The author is a writer and documentary filmmaker who grew up in Norfolk and lived in Virginia Beach for much of his life. He ran a production company, worked in college athletics and was curator at an art gallery in Virginia Beach for years.*