

THE HANDBELL CHOIR OF THE ST. AUGUSTINE LUTHERAN CHURCH IN GOTHA, GERMANY is making its 6th tour to Ohio.

The choir consists of 15 youth and adults, ringing 5+ octaves of handbells. It is directed by Matthias Eichhorn, a talented young musician, trained in Weimar, both in classical and jazz music.

The choir was founded in 1987 through the efforts of Epiphany Lutheran Church in Dayton. To make this foundation possible, money was raised from Lutheran handbell choirs throughout the United States for the purchase of the gift set of Malmark handbells. Permission was requested of and granted by the East German government in order that Epiphany could transport the bells across the Iron Curtain. Larry Hoffsis, Epiphany's senior pastor, and his wife Cindy, director of Epiphany's handbell program, were joined by Brian Middleton, an Epiphany member and student at the Westminster Choir College, in not only transporting the bells, but also providing a week-long instruction in handbell ringing. Matthias Eichhorn, then 8 years old, was one of the original ringers.

In the ensuing years, the choir has developed a wonderful reputation for musical excellence and was chosen by the State of Thuringia to be its representative at the World's Fair-Hanover 2000. The congregation now has five bell choirs with over 80 ringers from grade schoolers to senior citizens.

The St. Augustine Lutheran Church was built as an Augustinian Monastery in 1331. It early allied itself with the teachings of fellow Augustinian-Martin Luther. In fact, it is documented that Martin Luther preached in the Gotha church on four occasions, one of them being while enroute to defend his writings before the Emperor in Worms.

St. Augustine Lutheran has long been known for its music. One of its well-known directors of music was Johann Pachelbel, yes that Pachelbel--composer of Canon in D.

The congregation is best known in recent history for the lead role it played in the peaceful revolution in the fall of 1989 when Eastern Germany overthrew the Communist regime and later reunited with Western Germany to form the Germany we know today.

Gotha lies between Erfurt (where Luther was a university student, a monk and later ordained as a priest) and Eisenach (where Luther attended elementary school and was later given safekeeping in the near-by Wartburg Castle.)

Congregations sponsoring the Gotha handbell choir provide an evening meal, host a concert, receive a love offering, and in most cases, provide overnight lodging and breakfast.