

They yell, sob, pray and dance

By John McCoy

P-I Reporter

A half hour before the Friday service is scheduled to begin, the Community Chapel and Bible Training Center is full of worshippers.

For the most part, they are young, white and middle-class in appearance. The men, beardless with hair cut short, wear coats and ties. The women wear dresses and, knowing they will dance for hours, ballet slippers.

At 7:45 p.m., the time the service is supposed to begin, the sanctuary is filled with the din of hundreds of Chapelites speaking in tongues. While children play in the pews, their mothers and fathers stretch their arms heavenward, yelling, sobbing, praying incomprehensibly.

The dancing begins

The language of the Holy Spirit fades away as the choir ascends the stage to sing.

Members of the congregation — joyful and beaming — begin to dance.

Some dance alone, throwing their arms and legs about with abandon. Others, in accord with Pastor Donald Barnett's teaching, dance with their "connections," the man or woman with whom they have achieved a special, spiritual relationship. Infrequently is the connection a spouse.

Barnett, his white hair brushed back in a pompadour, dances at center stage front. His white dress shirt is unbuttoned, partially exposing his bare chest.

He and his partner move like flamenco dancers without the castanets. He wraps his arms around the woman and stares intensely into her eyes as they glide about floor. She returns his gaze.

Clinging couples

Barnett dances first with his wife, Barbara. Then he dances with his connection, a much younger brunette. Both women are clad in long, full dresses with tight bodices.

The dancing goes on and on. In an upstairs hallway, couples hold each other tightly, many of them praying.

Finally, about 9:30 p.m., Barnett ascends the rostrum to deliver the sermon. Bowing his head in prayer, he thanks the Lord for "putting out the dross," those who have questioned his teaching.

Inevitably, some will be snatched by Satan, he says. But those who stick with him, he promises, are marching to glory.