

The Importance of an Ongoing Vital Church Choir

In the words of Brian Hehn, Executive Director of the Center for Congregational Singing, "Traditionally a church choir's four key functions are:

- To lead and enliven the congregation's song
- To sing music that the congregation cannot
- To serve as a small group within the church for faith formation
- To sing music that glorifies God and edifies the congregation."

At First Church the sanctuary choir is all the above, but much more. The First Church Choir is first and foremost a group of people committed to meeting on a weekly basis to "plow" through new music, revisit older music and finesse hymns and responses. They labor over musical scores which they have known in the past but need to revitalize before singing them anew. They bravely encounter new choral material which stretches their ears and jars their musical senses.

Our choir is a group which enjoys learning about other faiths, other belief systems, and diverse global worship practices. They freely question the "what's" and "why's" involved in sacred singing today. How has the singing church evolved and become the kind of singing community it is today? What language shall we incorporate to fully include the worshipping congregation at First Church? How do we fit into the general scheme of things worship-wise in the world today?

Our choir is willing to struggle with other languages – not just foreign tongues, but other musical languages – the syncopated beat of a Jamaican hymn, the asymmetric rhythms of new contemporary styles, the free rhythms of Gregorian chant. They struggle to make the "unfamiliar" sound easy and accessible to the congregation on Sunday morning. It is their task to make the unfamiliar both understandable and accessible.

Our choir is a patient group which represents varying degrees of musical expertise. Those with long choir experience remember when they were novices and assist in the nurture of new incoming talent. Recognizing that singing comes more easily to some than others, seasoned singers encourage and support newer members as they become acclimated and settle into the rewards of the choral experience.

Our choir is a group of caring church members who share the life burdens of other members. Friendships develop quickly and care is taken to include newer members in activities and prayer. Fellowship over lunches and after-choir pizza times helps keep the choir in touch beyond the weekly rehearsal times. The choir looks out for one another.

There are two terms in music which are heard frequently. One is "unison" and the other is "harmony." Unison refers to "different voice parts singing the same melody or tune together." Harmony refers to a chordal structure in which different pitches are stacked to form a solid sound or series of solid sound. This stacked harmonic structure often requires tones within varying voice ranges to blend in support of a single melodic line carrying the text of an anthem or song.

With unison the message of a single melodic line is of primary importance. With harmony the feeling of conjoined tones is more important than any single pitch. The musical score often indicates which is more important. Sometimes harmony backs off to allow melody to soar. Sometimes rich harmonies dominate the

(continued on page 6)

music to carry us emotionally beyond the simple meaning of the text. And then there are those times when both unison and harmony are present and share importance.

So it is with our choir at First Church. As its director, I also sense a oneness in purpose when they sing. Singers realize that there are times when a unison effort is necessary to carry a poignant message with great strength and resolve. No one stands out – no one grandstands – it is a focused musical oneness dependent on each member agreeing musically to join all the other singers in one accord.

When harmony is prominent in a musical score, there is required cooperation and adjustment to insure that individual parts don't rob the spotlight from others. Harmony requires alignment and adjustment for the good of the whole. Harmony achieves its "oneness" through cooperation and mutual respect. Harmony achieves its beauty through consciously adjusting the sounds in each word for unanimity and of course... breathing together.

I think you see where I'm going with all this. Churches attain purpose and vitality through much the same process as a choir. Through scientific testing we know that when a choir sings well together, heart rates are in sync and breathing lines up. And in my experience working in churches, I have found the same kind of phenomenon occurs in the larger church community as it works together for the continuance of the common good.

Breathing together...caring for individuals...working as one body...focusing on covenant...being aware of needs...being guided by the same spirit...breathing together...all are choir goals. And all are also congregational goals.

Brian Hehn states that there are two choirs in every congregation. The smaller choir is the church choir. The larger choir is the congregation. Each of these choirs influences the other. The vitality of each of these singing groups is contingent on the other. They need each other to survive and strive and make God's music together.

I love hearing the congregation sing hymns on Sunday morning; it's when I truly worship as an individual. I love directing your wonderful church choir, but that's when I'm working (I hope you smiled at that). Please consider joining the First Church Choir. It's a rewarding experience and enlivens the larger worship experience every Sunday morning. We'd love to see you there! (Thursday nights at 7:30; Sunday mornings at 9:30).

"If I cannot fly... let me sing!" Stephen Sondheim

Blessings,

John Horman
Director of Music

