



If We Build It, Will They Come?

Challenge 2: Inadequate Membership

By James Tiefel

Conversations overheard in pastors' studies around WELS . . .

"I could see this coming. The choir has been a fixture here for years. As recently as a few years ago it was still going strong. But even then, the most active members were getting older. Younger people joined but didn't stick around. 'Couldn't make the commitment,' was the usual reason, but I always figured there was more to it. Then a few key singers retired, and the rehearsals stopped being fun. Our long-time director said she was really involved with her grandchildren, but I think she just lost interest. Now she picks songs the choir has sung for decades, and they're down to 10 or 12 people. To tell you the truth, the choir doesn't sound too good."

"I didn't see this coming. There was so much enthusiasm when the choir started. I confirmed a young man who taught music in one of the local schools, and he was really eager to get involved. A survey showed a lot of people were interested. Fifteen showed up at the first rehearsal, and a few more got involved after that. Everybody worked hard and the music was spectacular at Christmas. But then the choir just kind of died. Four or five people show up at rehearsals, and our director just throws up his hands in frustration."

Has either comment come from your study?

This issue of *Worship the Lord* addresses the second challenge WELS choirs are facing: The choir can't seem to attract enough people to make the effort worthwhile. Can the pastor help?

To act or not to act: that is the question

Pastors dream about the perfect church choir: 20+ experienced singers who get along with one another, are willing to prepare solid Lutheran music, and love singing for an experienced choir director with a servant's heart. This choir actively recruits new members and does it well. The wise pastor doesn't tinker with that choir; he simply thanks God and the choir as often as possible.

And even if the choir doesn't quite match that dream, a hands-off policy is often best. Don't try to fix what isn't broken. The choir doesn't have to rise to the pastor's (or his wife's) musical expectations. Do what pastors can do well: plan ahead, be supportive, make suggestions, be an advocate with parish leaders.

Sometimes, however, the pastor needs to do more than what pastors do well. The choir has become a problem and he has to get involved. He usually knows when the time has come. The good singers aren't showing up, the faithful singers don't sound too good, and the choir is becoming a liability in worship. Choir members are getting surly, the director is frustrated, and parish leaders lack experience in dealing with this kind of situation. Good people are at the pastor's doorstep, and they want him to do more than put another plea for choir members in the bulletin. This isn't the time to recruit new members. This is the time to stand back and assess what's keeping members away.

Why singers don't sing in the choir

The first task is to try to figure out why people aren't getting involved. Conventional wisdom says that Americans don't sing as much as they used to and can't sing as well as they'd like to. There's some truth to that, but just about every Lutheran church has a number of good singers who could easily participate in a choir. It's also true that people are busier than they used to be and find it difficult to fit regular rehearsals into their hectic schedules. On the other hand, people get involved in all sorts of things if they find value in them. Be careful about buying into copouts.

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So what keeps singers from participating in the choir?

- They're involved in many church activities already
- They like to sing, but aren't sure they can sing in parts as altos, tenors, or basses
- They don't sense the choir makes much of a contribution to worship
- They don't like the music the choir sings
- They find that rehearsals are all work and no play
- They find that rehearsals are all play and no work
- They feel shut out of the choir's tight social circle
- They can't warm up to the director

Observation: If the singers aren't singing, it isn't because they don't like to sing.

Identify and strategize solutions

"Fools jump in where angels fear to tread," but if the pastor is convinced of the value of a church choir (cf. the May issue of *Worship the Lord*), he'll come to realize that he would be a fool not to jump in. Don't work alone; you don't have the time. Without a lot of fanfare gather a small team, perhaps two or three men and women. Involve someone who's been involved in the music ministry; involve someone who hasn't. Find some folks whose gift is love and discernment. Work together and begin to assess the situation.

Take some time to quietly gather the data. Talk to people inside and outside the choir, and talk with them casually and carefully. Determine the issues that need to be addressed. Be thorough and objective; stay away from hearsay and rumors. Be prepared to speak the truth in love.

Nobody likes confrontation, neither the confronters nor the confronted. But if the choir's membership has been dwindling, the choir faithful may be relieved and even pleased that the pastor and some loving members are willing to lend a hand. Brainstorming is critical at this point: what are the possible solutions for this problem? Some of the solutions may come easily: a different rehearsal time or a ten minute break for snacks in the middle of a rehearsal might make a big difference. Other solutions may require help from people with more experience: a brother pastor who knows worship resources, a nearby director who can suggest

better rehearsal techniques. In some cases, money will be part of the solution. It may be time to confine some of the old favorites to the choir's filing cabinet and to invest in new settings of psalms, verses, and anthems that not only match the congregation's musical skills but also give the choir a more prominent role in worship. A national worship conference can invigorate frustrated choir directors and enable them to find new skills and opportunities—and that takes money, too.

If a congregation wants to stop the leakage in the choir, it has to plug the hole. *The critical issue in dealing with the challenge of a declining or struggling church choir is to identify problems honestly and then work together to create a strategy that can achieve solutions.*

Is there a downside to this procedure? Of course. The pastor shouldn't expect pushback from the director or the choir veterans, but he shouldn't be surprised if it comes. Evaluation is always a little uncomfortable, and change doesn't come easily for everyone. Pastors know that from their own experience, and musicians may be a little more sensitive than the average pastor! Love and patience are the key.

But love and patience cut two ways. When the congregation's musicians begin to stand in cement, they're failing to show love and patience to their fellow members. It doesn't happen often, but it happens sometimes that a choir director and even a choir may have to be dismissed or disbanded for the good of the congregation. The gospel ministry and its ministry of music are always more important than one musician or one musical group, especially when the musicians have lost the heart of a servant.

Recruit choir members with confidence

No pastor is going to encourage his members to jump onto a sinking ship. We don't do anyone any favors by begging and cajoling people to join an effort that's bound to disappoint or fail. Sometimes we have to fix things before we begin recruiting efforts. But when a problem has been identified and a strategy for improvement is in place, the pastor can assume another role he's good at: encouraging people to participate in the congregation's ministry of music.



Start with the singers who have been active in the past. Speak to them personally. Be honest about the evaluative process that has occurred. Accentuate the good they can accomplish and ask them to give the choir another chance. Check in with them from time to time to see how things are going.

If the singers aren't singing, it isn't because they don't like to sing.

The pastor gets to know who the singers are. He hears them at camp outs and VBS song times. He discovers who attends the local symphony concerts. He hears people sing in church. Bring up the subject in a natural way. Invite them and encourage them to participate in the choir. Supply the information they need to get started with the group.

Most congregations ask new members to fill out some sort of service questionnaire. Edit the form to include the category "Interested in singing." When that box gets checked, send a quick e-mail with the new member's name and contact information to your choir director. When you see the new member over the course of time, ask if an invitation arrived.

Talk to the young people in your confirmation class and teen group about participating in the choir. Take time to explain to them the purpose and role of the Lutheran choir and help them to see its value in worship. Intergenerational groups are popular these days, and the choir is the perfect place for adults and teens to be involved in ministry together. Be enthusiastic with young people and encourage the choir to welcome them enthusiastically.

Let's all agree to get past the traditional bulletin announcement method of recruiting and retaining choir members. It doesn't work; save your toner for something else. Everything in our society and in your congregation is about personal contacts: one-on-one conversations are best, but phone calls, e-mail, and texting are also good.

Enable and empower the choir to recruit

Perhaps the best thing a pastor can do when it comes to recruiting for the choir is to encourage the director and choir members to recruit on their own. If the director tends to be a little timid, get more outgoing members involved. Here are some ways to help make this happen:



- Make a note for yourself or your office assistant to get an updated membership list to the choir recruiters every six months so they have up-to-date contact information.

- Suggest that the director or the recruiters create an e-mail or texting distribution list for all of the people who are presently participating in the choir. The choir's recruiters can send reminders about rehearsals and approaching singing dates. Once in a while send a "note from the pastor" message to recruiters and ask them to forward it to the rest of the group.
- Encourage the recruiters to have a personal stake in the choir's regular procedures. Rehearsal techniques, music selection, and personality issues all contribute to making recruitment efforts more or less difficult. The right people in the right places will recognize potential problems long before the pastor catches wind of them.
- Help the recruiters establish an e-mail distribution list of people with potential choir interest. Encourage them to add and delete names based on membership changes or changing circumstances (a new baby, off to college, etc.). Encourage a regular practice of sending invitations to these folks in early January and August.
- Ask the director and recruiters to consider an occasional choir event; an Easter or Christmas service works well for this. Invite potential singers to join rehearsals several weeks before the event and to participate only in the event. Add a special social component to the rehearsals and make the evening fun.
- What about suggesting a quartet composed of choir members and giving them an opportunity to recruit at parish gatherings: fellowship dinners, teen meetings, school events (the National Anthem at a basketball game?). Let people see the choir in action outside worship and that participation can be enjoyable and rewarding.
- An important aspect of retaining members is that members express their love and concern for one another. One of the choir members might take the responsibility for sending cards and notes when another member is experiencing joys or sadness in life.

The chances are good that the pastor won't ever get around to actually carrying out these ideas—and he shouldn't be involved; he has other things to do. But he can share this list with people in his choir. So when you're done reading this, pass this issue of *Worship the Lord* to people who can get these things done in your congregation.

The choir's success begins with the pastor

The pastor may be tempted to turn away from the challenges that face the church choir. Recruiting singers seems to be the choir director's responsibility or something the worship committee ought to do. Of course, if others were doing their jobs well, the choir would be flourishing. In many cases it comes down to this: either the pastor gets involved or the choir dies.

So what can a pastor do? Not many pastors can direct a choir, and not every pastor can sing in a choir. The pastor who takes on those responsibilities undoubtedly adds work he doesn't need and probably won't solve the problems anyway.

But there are some critical goals that musical and non-musical pastors can achieve. The previous issue of *Worship the Lord* mentioned a few:

- Assign the choir an indispensable purpose
- Make sure singers and directors realize how important they are
- Help your director understand and appreciate the purpose of the Lutheran choir
- Share whatever resources are at your disposal, including the seven issues of this series
- Lead your congregation in its support of the choir with words of encouragement, positive publicity, and generous resource allocation

This article adds a few more:

- Work with others to identify problems that keep people from participating
- Brainstorm and strategize solutions
- Take on aspects of recruiting that are natural for the pastor
- Enable and empower the choir director and choir leaders to recruit and retain members

If we build it, will they come?

There's only one guarantee: if we don't build it, they won't come. All the recruiting in the world isn't going to attract singers to a choir that's breaking or broken. There's no encouragement here to recruit church members for an unhappy status quo.

But if a choir is worth having, it's worth working for. Problem solving is never easy. It includes honest assessment, difficult choices, and solutions that are sometimes challenging and uncomfortable. Even when the choir is back on its feet again, it's vital to identify ways to retain and expand membership. The Lord Jesus has his own way of bringing success to our labors, but he tends to bless faithful stewardship. Build your congregation's choir on a solid foundation, and the chances are good that singers will come to praise the Lord and proclaim his love.



Helps for the Choir Director

In more ways than one the choir director is the Pied Piper of the congregation's choir program. Many WELS choir directors, however, lack the skill, savvy, and experience to carry out their work well. Some pastors can help them, but most can't. Here are a few suggestions for those who can't (and even for those who can):

NPH offers a 120 page booklet entitled *A Novice's Guide to Directing the Church Choir*. Author Kenneth Kosche, longtime choir director at Concordia-Wisconsin and St. John, Glendale (LCMS), is a practical musician who offers good advice to inexperienced choir directors.

CPH offers *Letters to My Choir: Reflections on Excellence in Ministry* by veteran choir director Eldon Balko. Topics range from the purpose of the church choir to the basic mechanics of choral singing.

Christian Worship Manual (NPH 1993) devotes a section to music in Christian worship, including the music of the choir. This is a must-study primer for all Lutheran choir directors. The writing is fairly academic, however, and may strain the staying power of a new or modestly skilled director.

Buried on a shelf in the pastor's study may be a copy of *Come Worship Christ*, a video-enhanced worship education

tool produced in 1996. Not every pastor who purchased this product for his Bible classes realized that the set contains training materials for the organist and choir director. Look in the middle of the notes. The information remains timely.

The main article in this issue mentioned seeking help from a nearby director. Not every congregation can locate a nearby director with the experience and skill to help a struggling choir director. But for the cost of an airplane ticket and a modest honorarium a congregation (or a group of congregations) could invite a veteran choir director to conduct a choral directing workshop. These have been well-received in WELS. Contact the Commission on Worship for some people resources.

The content of the remaining issues in this series will be increasingly applicable to your choir's director. Issues like music selection, rehearsal strategies, and vocal technique will be addressed. Please share this valuable information with your church's choir director(s).

The 2011 National Worship Conference may be past as you read these words, but keep the event on your horizon for 2014. Workshops and choral sessions are valuable for any choir director, but the best part of attending may be that it lifts the spirits of those who attend.