



Beyond the Traditional Choir: Alternative Ideas for Vocal Music

Challenge 3: A standing choir is asking too much (or too little)

By Jackie Gerlach

Does your church have a skilled adult choir that meets faithfully every Thursday at 7:00 P.M. and sings two times each month? Or are your best singers the pastor and a ninth grade girl who sings in her high school's choir? Are your only instruments a small electronic keyboard and the clarinet a thirty-something mom used to play in her high school's marching band? If your church more closely resembles the second rather than the first, can you ever hope to have meaningful vocal music in your congregation on a consistent basis? Yes, you can! With a little planning and some imagination, adding musical variety *is* possible in most, if not all, churches.

I hesitated to accept this writing assignment because I wasn't sure I had something unique to offer. However, I was encouraged simply to explain what I've done at Christ the Lord in Brookfield, Wisconsin, for the past fifteen years. The congregation where I serve has an average weekly attendance of 380 and a Lutheran elementary school with 83 students. Some of my experiences and ideas may work for you where you serve. Some may not. But in all of them, I hope you find inspiration for more frequent and varied music in your congregation, whatever its size or resources.

Getting started

In late June my pastor sends me a grid that outlines worship plans from September through May. Once he does, I schedule all of our standing groups: the adult choir, handbells, elementary school classes, and Sunday School. Most of the groups sing or play for worship nine or ten times per year. The Sunday School children sing four times.

Your congregation might be large enough that it has these standing groups and is looking for more. It might be small enough that it's looking for less. Regardless, what I do next is really the focus of this article. As the weeks and months go by, I try to fill in the "holes" with additional vocal or instrumental music appropriate for the day.

On the second page you will find an excerpt from our planning chart. The shaded blocks are "holes" to fill. Two fuller examples are at connect.wels.net/worship.

Usually, I look for music first and then see what vocalists or instrumentalists are needed. Sometimes, I do the reverse. I find singers and look for music that fits their abilities, doing my best to match the music to the number and skill of the volunteers. An anthem doesn't have to be the first option. If only a handful of average singers are available, a unison arrangement of the Verse of the Day, a psalm setting, or a simple two-part anthem can provide welcome variety. Rather than trying to perform the Hallelujah Chorus for Easter, consider a more modest piece, such as those from GIA's *Not for Children Only* series, which uses a percussion instrument and a simple yet interesting piano accompaniment. Regardless of who ends up singing, their unified, confident voices will enhance rather than distract from worship.

Alternatives or additions to the standing choir

Once I've identified Sundays when vocal participation is needed and possibilities for music, I then schedule other singers as the weeks go by. Even a small church with few musicians likely can add additional vocal color to worship.

Solos and small groups

If your congregation doesn't have a choir that meets each week or is struggling to keep a choir together, consider organizing a choral group that meets occasionally rather than every week (p.3-4).

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| 2011 | Sermon | Easter Theme: <i>My Lord and My God</i> | Hymns | Service | 8:00 | 10:30 |
|------|---------------|--|---------------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|----------------|
| 5/11 | John 20:19-21 | He Gives Peace in Confusion | 165 (1-7), 760*, 167, 165 (8-9) | Divine Service 1 | | Grade 1-2 |
| 5/8 | Luke 24:13-35 | He Opens the Scriptures | 735, 160, 151, 166* | p. 38 | | |
| 5/15 | John 10:1-10 | He Is the Good Shepherd | 766, 374*, 145, 163*, 375 | Divine Service 2 | Adult Bells | Adult Bells SS |
| 5/22 | John 14:1-12 | He Is the Way, the Truth, and the Life | 143, 356, 146*, 164 | Morning Praise – Haugen | Adult Choir | Adult Choir |
| 5/26 | Luke 24:44-53 | He Lifted Up His Hands and Blessed Them | 169, 173 174, 769 | | Grade 5-8 Junior Bells | |

Utilize solos, duets, or three- or four-part groups. If there are no soloists, perhaps the pastor can serve in this way.

Most churches don't have an oversupply of solo singers, but many in the pews do have pleasant singing voices. Strong voices that are not quite solo quality can be boosted by adding just one or two more voices on each part. Using microphones to amplify solos and groups in an acoustically unresponsive church can give the singers confidence and put listeners at ease since songs can be clearly heard and understood. Use of amplification has allowed me to utilize more people in small ensembles. Once or twice, we have even used microphones to slightly boost one section of the choir to balance them with a much stronger section.

Be imaginative with different groupings. Many combinations can work. Last Good Friday, sixteen high school to retired-age men sang for worship. They practiced three times: before a Lenten service, after Maundy Thursday worship, and an hour before Good Friday worship. Two high school senior boys sang a duet this year. Last summer a sophomore girl and college-aged boy performed a two-part anthem. Recently, a mom, dad, and their seventh grade daughter sang together.

If you don't know who has musical talent, conduct an interest survey and ask the pastor to make this questionnaire a part of new member orientation meetings. Try to notice individuals who sing well in church, sincerely compliment them, and ask if they would like to sing for worship. I find that new volunteers feel most comfortable singing in larger groups at first. Solos or duets can come later when they have more confidence. New recruits usually benefit from extra rehearsals so their first efforts are successful when nervousness might be highest. Veterans can probably practice less.

Children's groups

Children of all ages can provide beautiful vocal music for worship. Looking beyond the obvious "kiddie songs," even preschoolers could sing the General Verse right out of *Service of the Word*. Our kindergarten teacher has her children sing the refrains of the psalms for worship while the congregation sings the verses, and

another kindergarten teacher I know patiently taught her class the Lord's Prayer from *Compline II* out of *Christian Worship: New Service Settings*. Each week they learned a phrase and drew pictures to illustrate the meanings. They eventually knew the entire liturgical piece and sang it for worship!

Festival Choirs

Perhaps members in your congregation love to sing but cannot commit to the regular choir. So invite them for just one or two festivals each year, such as Reformation or Easter. For these festival choirs, you can take advantage of larger numbers and consider performing *more* challenging pieces.

*Be imaginative with different groupings.
Many combinations can work.*

Advanced Choirs

Is your congregation blessed with musicians who would enjoy a challenge beyond what most church choirs can tackle? One larger church formed a small Motet Choir. This group met weekly to prepare quite difficult anthems. While they still participated in the regular choir, members of this group enjoyed this extra challenge. A group like this may require less practice time, or they might enjoy spending even more time preparing a particularly polished musical product.



Secrets to success

Regardless of the amount of resources you have at your disposal, remembering some important principles will make your pursuit of musical variety successful.

Not every service needs to be the same

Sometimes I schedule a soloist who can only help in one or two of our three weekly services. As a result, two or three different singers end up singing on one weekend. Similarly, when children from our elementary school are scheduled to sing, I try to find a soloist or group to sing the same song for the other services. Our choir director sometimes polls the choir to see who might be able to fill one of these spots. I meet with these volunteers before or after their choir rehearsal to briefly practice the added selection. A flute player might play a descant on Sunday but an oboe player, who works Sundays, plays on Monday night. Or, someone plays a descant on the synthesizer when an instrumentalist is unavailable. It's a little extra work but worth the effort for worshipers who otherwise would miss this music. If a piece that the first and second graders prepare doesn't fit well for an adult soloist to repeat, I look for a different solo based on the same section of Scripture or with a similar theme. Sometimes, our pastor selects a congregational response, like a hymn or psalm, to fill the slot which vocal music fills in the other service.

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Try to be flexible

Most churches are made up of many busy people. As a result, it can be difficult or even impossible to navigate through everyone's complicated schedules to coordinate a practice. If a church has willing singers who are unable to attend the rehearsals, alternate practice times might be needed for absent singers. Some have solved this problem by rehearsing on a Sunday morning between or after services. It is now quite easy to make CD or mp3 recordings so singers can practice on their own. Recordings supplied by music publishers can also help missing musicians learn their part. One singer I work with usually learns the melodies of solos in the car on the way to and from work. Although not ideal, the whole group can rehearse together on the day of the service.

*A kindergarten teacher . . . taught her class the Lord's Prayer from **Compline II**.*

There is no doubt that these accommodations add a degree of hassle for the director, but this flexibility might be just what it takes to make vocal variety possible in your congregation. For the past five years I have scheduled our handbell choir's playing dates around one member's every-other-weekend shifts as a nurse in a nursing home. One trumpet player works evenings at

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Advance Planning from a Pastor's Perspective

By David Kolander

One thing I have found helpful and beneficial over the years is to plan the worship schedule for blocks of time in advance. For example, I work on the September to May block during June. My goal is to choose a general theme for each Sunday, as well as to select the sermon text, liturgy, and hymns. While slight changes are possible, we normally follow our advance planning.

Admittedly, this kind of planning is not always easy because it takes a fair amount of time. For many, it might be more practical to work through smaller blocks of worship services. No matter how many services you choose to plan, the key is completing that portion of the schedule well in advance of its use. This provides time for the musical leaders to select music and work to prepare it. The congregation and the musical leaders appreciate this kind of planning, making it much easier to see the value of setting aside this time to work on the worship schedule well in advance.

Family Choir

By Mary Prange

The original idea behind family choir was to try to get different people to participate in choral groups for worship. Children from grade 3 on up were welcome to attend rehearsals with their parents for this short-term commitment. I also included the two school choirs by teaching them the songs during school so that they could participate even if their parents didn't come. Since the Senior Choir served as the backbone, rehearsals were held on the same night as the Senior Choir usually met. We alternated weeks between Senior Choir and Family Choir so that no one had to add an extra night to their schedule.

I selected an Easter cantata, a variety of which are available from publishers such as Hope or Lorenz. I made use of the rehearsal CDs to help people learn their parts, but I used piano accompaniment when we presented the cantata. We presented the piece in place of our regular Sunday worship rather than scheduling a separate service.

Each year between 50 and 60 participated besides children's choirs. It was a joy to see the faces of the participants ranging in age from eight to eighty enjoying the music and the message. The listeners were also edified by seeing young and old bringing the message of salvation through the gift of music. And in the end, I did gain a few new members for the Senior Choir!

Wal-Mart and comes to our brass practices on an evening lunch break. And our excellent French horn player will not miss a Packer game for a rehearsal!

Value and build relationships

Take time to get to know people in your church, build relationships with them, and encourage them to be honest about the time they have to serve in this way. I never want to burn someone out or make them feel obligated to help. Sometimes life gets in the way of members being able to help with the music ministry. It is important for people to know that you are thankful for *any* help they can give and understand when they have other commitments. We have a talented trumpet player who has four preschool-age children and recently earned his master's degree. He only played twice last year and not at all this year. In his absence, I relied on a high school trumpet player who gained valuable experience and played well.

One trumpet player works evenings at Wal-Mart and comes to our brass practices on an evening lunch break.

Our choir director uses an e-mail list that continues to invite potential singers even if they haven't participated in years. You never know when a person's circumstances might change. Be sure to thank people for participating. Leaders of our church recently organized a catered dinner with entertainment to show appreciation to all who had participated in the music ministry within the last two years. Some churches regularly send thank-you notes to music volunteers.

Keeping it all straight

With all of the options for musical variety and choral participation, the possibilities might seem overwhelming. Three things help me keep all this music variety straight: my pastor's advance planning, a music librarian, and my laptop. A well-organized music collection saves time and money, and a music librarian can help achieve and maintain this. My laptop helps me contact people efficiently through e-mail. However, teens seem to respond most promptly to text or Facebook messages! I have found online resources, such as Google calendars and Google documents, to be helpful so that pastors, other musicians, and I can access schedules and calendars online from any computer. If you would like to try these tools, experiment, or ask someone in your congregation to help you get started.

My congregation might be very different from yours. But even if I were a volunteer serving the second imaginary church described in the first paragraph, here's what I would do. I'd ask the ninth grade girl and the pastor to try solos and duets and the clarinet to play some instrumental parts. I'd see if others could sing along with

the two strong singers in unison and maybe even in parts, and I'd probably find someone to play a simple, decorative percussion part. When people hear musical variety, they appreciate it, and others come out of the woodwork to tell you that they, too, once played the flute or sang alto in the choir!



An Alternative to the Standing Choir

By Lu Kolander

Our current adult choir organization grew from an effort to better utilize the musical gifts of members. Though many expressed a willingness to sing as part of a choir group, not all were able to commit to rehearsing regularly on the one designated evening each week of the choir season. These names are now gathered in a choir e-mail group. They receive messages several times throughout the season asking them to prayerfully consider joining us to prepare selections for the various Sunday, midweek and festival services for which the choir is scheduled to sing. Generally, they are asked to commit to three rehearsals prior to the singing date. If they are not able to attend those rehearsals, an offer is made to meet with them to read through the music privately or in a small group. Or, for those who have the ability to play through the parts on their own, copies of the music are offered. Few singers have utilized the last two options but it has occasionally been helpful when we need help in balancing voice parts.

The advantage of this approach is that we are able to involve more members in the music ministry of our church. Singers feel welcome to join us for a few weeks when they know they have the time available in their family or work schedule without feeling as though they are letting anyone down by not committing to a nine-month choir schedule.

The disadvantage is that, since we generally spend two rehearsals learning the music and one rehearsal incorporating any special instrumentation and adding "polish" to the pieces, the selections need to be relatively simple. There are singers who appreciate this. There are others who prefer and need a challenge in order to fully utilize their gifts. As the schedule allows, the choir has spent more than the three week "norm" on pieces which challenge the group's members and which varies the repertoire for the enhancement of the choral contributions to worship.