The "New" Choir by Sheri Gould



Recently I have had increased opportunities to speak/address the needs associated with participating in or leading a choir. As I travel around the world, my goal is always to encourage and help equip those I speak to. I want to help them to be able to accomplish their goals in all things having to do with music ministry. Since I last wrote an article about choir, I believe things have evolved somewhat and so I thought it might be time to revisit the subject. First I want to briefly review things I've covered in the past:

A choir director is like a pastor – It's very important to take advantage of the opportunity available to you as a choir director/music minister/worship leader for truly loving your "flock". A choir is very similar to a "mini-church" in that it is a body of believers set apart for a specific task. As a choir director you are the leader and therefore I am calling you a "pastor/shepherd".

Validate each and every person's value and strengths – As a choir director, it's important that you take the time to get to know each member well enough to understand their strengths and gifts. A choir member that feels important and necessary is much more likely to be committed and take the position of choir member seriously.

The director needs to be prepared and upbeat – As the leader in this music ministry (as with any other) it's important that you be good at what you do. You need to set the example of being prepared. Know your music. Be familiar enough with each of the individual parts that you can spot a wrong note when it's sung. If you feel inadequate with regard to your training (which is so very common) then take some courses or study on your own to get better. Grow!

I have always believed that most people truly don't mind showing up for a rehearsal that is *effective*. What people mind is having their tine wasted. So make sure that you maximize your rehearsal time by being prepared and having a plan. Keep the rehearsals moving. Make sure people leave better off than they came. Most people want to do a great job, it's your job to help them do just that.

TEACH your choir – And while you're at the business of growing as a director, take your choir along with you. Never forget the wonderful opportunity you have to help shape and grow your choir. You may not have a lot of extra time for this—in fact, you probably feel that you have none. But, let me assure you that EVERY minute you spend teaching your singers new skills will *save you time in the future*. You will be helping to fill their "vocal tool boxes" and once they've acquired these new skills they will be able to readily use them when you need them to. It's way worth the investment of time. Take five minutes—FIVE MINUTES—each week to teach them something new. Perhaps you don't feel that confident as a vocal instructor. You can at least share with them

each week the things that YOU'VE been learning. I offer multiple resources on my website to help equip you as a vocalist if you are looking for some help.

Choose GREAT music - I can't emphasize this enough. When you are choosing music make sure that the songs you choose "grab" you within the first 10 seconds. Make sure that they are fun, exciting, beautiful, powerful, etc. You want to love the song so that you can teach it with enthusiasm. You want your CHOIR to love the song so that they can SING it with enthusiasm. And lastly you want your congregation to be able to connect immediately with the song so that they can truly have a powerful experience.

Require respect for the director - One of the most difficult things about working with a church choir is that although you are in authority by virtue of your position, you are working with your friends and peers. This creates for an interesting dynamic. In school choirs, the students are led by teachers who are in authority over them and give them a grade at the end of the semester. In professional choirs the members are chosen and/or hired by a professional that is clearly in authority and in fact may be in charge of your paycheck. There is rarely any fraternizing between director and choir members in most of these situations.

In a church choir however, it's completely different. Your choir members may be in other positions of authority over you—for example, I have always had the privilege of having my pastor be in my choir. Three different churches that I served as music minister in all had pastors that loved to sing (and were good at it!). Your choir members may be filled with your close friends (mine always have been). I even had my older brother (who was a great singer and way more talented musically than I ever will be AND with more experience in better choirs than I had!) in my first church choir. These types of situations can make it difficult for you to lead in a truly effective way. It can even contribute to losing complete control at any given time. But it is essential that you take and maintain control as much as possible. Take authority and realize that everyone will benefit when you do. Make it clear from the beginning who is in charge and what the rules are. Then do your best to follow through. This will help to make your time together enjoyable for everyone and highly effective.

[Now] I'm going to outline some more practical things we can do to make our choirs more effective.

Covenant Agreement and Commitment

First of all, we can't get anywhere without a solid level of commitment. Anyone who had ever tried to manage or direct a group of singers knows the TOTAL frustration of trying to deal with absences and lateness. When half of your group meanders in over a period of 15-20 minutes late it is disruptive and disrespectful to everyone involved. Rules regarding involvement should be outlined in a covenant agreement that should be signed yearly by everyone. From time to time these agreements may need to be updated but they are very helpful for making clear what is expected of everyone and what the consequences are for not living up to your commitment. We are often hesitant to require commitment of people in our music ministries because it's all volunteer (most of the time anyway). However—that is erroneous. YOU are most likely a volunteer and YOU are committed! We can eliminate so many problems if we can simply establish a firm level of commitment from the beginning. I have often said in my workshops, "Give me three committed people and I can give you a kickin' trio. Give me 15 people who are Uncommitted and all I can give you is chaos!" It is a *privilege* to serve in this capacity and it needs to be treated as such.

Personal Growth

A side note to commitment is personal growth. One of the reasons I recommend requiring auditions for all choir/worship team members every year, is to help challenge members toward growing in their craft and musicianship. (For more information on the importance and "how to" of auditions email me and I'll be happy to send you information on this important topic) Without an incentive it's easy to become lax in this. Everyone benefits when each person takes responsibility for growing. Consider making this a part of your covenant agreement.

Vocal Health

Today's singers are inundated with harmful vocal practices from many different sources. It's more important than ever to make sure that your vocalists understand and use proper vocal technique—especially low larynx singing. It's particularly easy for singers in a choir to default to high larynx singing and that takes its toll vocally very quickly, leaving your singers with sore throats and strained neck muscles. In addition, a thorough understanding of what makes for good vocal health is essential for all singers. Hydration is SO IMPORTANT so make sure that water is always available for your singers. Making water easily accessible during rehearsals will increase their ability to stay hydrated and help to get the most out of their voices. Also make sure that no one consumes any type of drop that contains menthol—menthol is very drying. If good vocal technique is applied and proper vocal health care is followed, your choir will have the essentials for thriving! (For a more complete discussion of vocal health care, don't hesitate to contact me and I can send you some helpful information)

Blend

Getting your choir to blend their voices is essential to getting a unified and powerful sound. Lots of different things affect blend: vowel shapes, vibrato, volume levels, tone quality, resonance, registers, timbre, etc. However, I would venture to say that nothing is more important than the art of *listening to each other*. This cannot be emphasized enough. The old adage "God gave us two ears and one mouth so we would listen twice as much as we speak" should certainly be applied to singing in a choir! Listening is the key to changing each of the above mentioned issues from problems into assets. So make sure you spend a lot of time focusing on the importance of listening and even employing some exercises and warm-ups that help your choir members learn how to listen better to each other. One way to help improve blend—and listening—is to have each section sing a selected part and have the other sections assess whether or not they were blended, in tune, singing with proper dynamics, etc. Then, of course, give each section the opportunity to be on the hot seat! One great thing that happens as a result is that everyone becomes a vocal coach, to an extent, and it doesn't always have to be YOU pointing out issues. You will find that your singers are better at this than you may have thought and that they respond well to each other (providing no one gets critical).

Presentation

The final step for any choir is the actual presentation. With today's modern church choirs we often have what is commonly referred to as a "Worship Choir" either instead of or in addition to the more traditional choir. This often makes the final presentation somewhat different in that the songs are not sung as a type of "special' music to be focused on but rather as an extension of the worship team/congregation in worship. There is an important difference here in terms of preparation. Traditional choirs need to perfect their songs *musically* so that the presentation is an accurate depiction of the written choral piece including, but not limited to: dynamics, harmony, rhythm and overall countenance. Whereas the "Worship Choir" is typically less focused on perfecting the musical aspects and more focused on *leading in worship* through the medium of song. This is not to say that they

are off the hook for preparing musically, it is simply to say that because they serve a different function in the service they have a different priority in presenting. This will obviously affect what should be focused on during preparation.
Both types of choirs need to know their music. I am a huge proponent of memorizing music whenever any type of presentation is involved. However, with a "Worship Choir" this may be nearly impossible at times considering the sheer volume of music that must be sung and prepared. Many of the songs will be sung repeatedly over time and that will help, but preparing multiple songs each week with only one rehearsal of likely no more than 2-3 hours will make it very difficult to memorize each and every song. The use of lyric projection can help to make it appear as though the songs are memorized and that is helpful.

Since the "Worship Choir" functions as a part of the overall worship team, they need to remember that their primary function is to serve as worship leaders. Therefore, they need to focus more on being able to worship freely as they sing. Two important exercises I recommend are 1) speaking through the lyrics individually and as a group so that the meaning becomes more clear to the singers. So often we, as singers, gloss over the words hastily without taking time to truly ponder and understand their meaning. We cannot effectively communicate the message behind the song if we don't understand it ourselves. 2) All members of any worship team need to be taking time to worship alone at home. This should involve not only singing through the songs in terms of practice but *worshiping* through the songs as well. Having a clear understanding of the lyrics will help to make the meaning more personal. As the Lord speaks to you through the songs during your practice throughout the week, you can pray, worship and sing through the songs in a true spirit of worship that will help to prepare you for leading others in worship when you gather corporately.