

How to Start and Maintain a Choir

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A well-organized, well-run choir can bring energy and joy to your services; a poorly run choir can be a nightmare. People join choirs for a variety of reasons and not all of them have to do with singing. You **must** have a strong, skilled Music Director to successfully develop, inspire, and direct a choir.

The Choir Director:

- Start with a strong, skilled, capable music director who understands and embraces the mission/vision of the church.
- The Music Director and Choir Director could be the same person. If you have a separate choir director, they would ideally be working under the leadership of the Music Director. If the Choir Director can't direct and accompany then either the Music Director would need to accompany the choir or you would also need an accompanist.
- Be sure your Music Director has a passion for working with volunteer singing groups.
- Be sure that your Music Director can effectively choose repertoire that is appropriate for the skill level of the choir and whose lyrics use New Thought theology.
- Ideally, the Music Director would meet with the minister to choose songs that pair with the lessons that are planned.
- Rehearsals are essential.
 - First, it allows the choir members to become comfortable with the song so that they can sing with confidence.
 - Secondly, it allows the Music Director to create a harmonious blend.
 - Thirdly, it allows the choir to bond with one another, to become friends, to become a community.
 - **A choir will often be your church's largest group of volunteers.**
- Since most volunteer choir members probably won't read music, the Music Director/Choir Director will need to be able to teach them their parts or create the harmony parts.
- The Music Director/Choir Director needs to be able to read music and play from a Lead Sheet as well as a Piano Vocal Score.
- The Music Director/Choir Director may need to purchase sheet music, or create sheet music for the choir, and make recordings for the singers to learn their parts.

- Choose repertoire at which the choir can excel. Having great unison or two-part singing is far better than haphazard 4 part choral music. Everyone wants to be part of a winning team.

How to Start the Choir:

- **Start small.** Choose songs that they can successfully pull off even if those songs are done in unison. Once the congregation sees the fun that the choir is having, more people will join.
- Start with a casual invitation for interested singers to come to an evening get together and sing.
- You could start by forming a choir for a special occasion such as Easter or Christmas and then develop it from there.
- You could start with backup singers to help lead the congregational music each Sunday.
- Set a regular rehearsal time and require that all attend this rehearsal in order to sing on Sunday morning.
- Rehearse the songs weeks in advance.
- You probably already have several gifted singers in the congregation. Consider hosting a “*spirit sharing*” to encourage folks to share their gifts.
- Most churches don’t audition singers for their choirs. It would leave a lot of people out. If you are looking at building community you would want as many people singing as possible.
- Create a set of guidelines, like heart agreements, at the beginning of each choir season. People can’t follow guidelines that they’re unaware of. For example, if you don’t want someone to show up on Easter Sunday wearing a big red hat, mention NO hats in your guidelines.
- Consider having a choir mini retreat for a few hours on a weekend where you sing together, learn new songs, share lunch, and bond. You want choir to be fun as well as a vibrant part of your music ministry. Create time for them to connect with each other and have fun. This could be achieved by something as simple as a yearly Christmas party.
- Praise the choir. They are volunteers and deserve gratitude for their commitment to the church and the music ministry.
- Your rehearsal will allow the Music Director to get to know individual voices to allow for the ideal placement on Sunday mornings.
- Although choir robes and stoles are considered “old school” it is nice to have a uniform look for the performance days. Consider having the choir dress in black and white, adding a touch of red for the months of December and February.

When to debut your new Choir?

- You want the first choir performance to be outstanding. To achieve this, you should rehearse for several weeks before debuting the choir. This gives the choir time to form a community, learn the songs so that they can lift their eyes from the music, and exude confidence.
- Ideally, you would start with congregational music. When a group of singers leads the congregational music, making eye contact with the congregation with smiles, the congregation is more likely to sing along.
- Sunday morning is NOT the place to perform substandard music. You want to enhance the service. Always have a Plan B in case your choral pieces don't come together as quickly as you expect.
- You might create trios or small ensembles with some of the choir members.

Other things to consider:

- **Remember that you want the music in your service to be as good as you can possibly make it and you will probably have to hire at least one professional to make sure that happens.**
- There is no room within a music ministry or choir for a "star."
- Sometimes, choir members want to do solos that they aren't ready for yet. When a choir has become a music ministry this will be less of a problem, but initially the Music Director may have to gently let them know they're not quite ready for a solo yet. This is where the choir guidelines will come in handy.
- Create a mission vision statement for the choir that aligns with the mission vision of the church.
- Consider creating other spaces for them to perform instead of Sunday morning. You could host spirit sharing where each interested person could perform a song; you could give them a verse or chorus of a congregational song instead of a whole solo.
- Remember that the music ministry/choir is a team and you can't allow one person to continually disrupt rehearsals or behave out of line with your choir guidelines. One person acting out can cause several committed and capable people to leave the group. You are not doing your ministry any favors by failing to remove a disruptive person.
- Consider having choir officers such as someone to do the music filing, someone to keep a list of current choir contact information, help with pastoral duties such as birthday cards, get well cards, etc.

Create it and they will come:

When you model an inspiring, uplifting music ministry others will want to join in. No matter how small a group you start with by making sure that everyone is confident and ready to shine on their debut Sunday you have taken the first step into weaving a group of singers into a music ministry that will be a blessing to your spiritual community and carry the weekly message home with the listener.