

Anthem

A Reflection on Singing in the Church Choir

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On November 4, 1912, at a congregational meeting, my church chose its first song leader, A. G. Hvass. The written record says, “The choir has also faithfully served during this entire time.” It’s now a hundred years later, and our church choir is still faithful and still singing. This anniversary has led me to reflect on what it means to be a member of a choir, its role in my life, and its role in the life of my church.

In these days of self-absorption, self-promotion, and self-interest, being a member of a choir offers a striking contrast. Choir is about being a part of something larger than yourself. Singing in a church choir is all about “us” not “me.” In a choir, if you stand out you’re doing something wrong. While you may fear going it alone, in a choir you join other altos, tenors, sopranos, or baritones, and together you make it possible for something powerful to happen.

And something powerful does happen. Choir becomes a place of service in the church, a place to grow, a small group, a glimpse of heaven, a front-row seat, and ultimately, a lesson about life in the church.

In choir, we make a commitment to participate in worship, and to join with the pastoral staff as they lead the congregation in worship. The pieces we sing are carefully chosen to enhance the texts. We sing for baptisms, funerals, and during communion. We sing in the midst of our hectic lives, through our own joys and sorrows, because sometimes, when things are the hardest for us, we need to sing. By our very presence, we are affirming our faith. And, throughout all of these occasions, there are times when the Spirit moves in the message of the morning, combines with the words of an anthem or a hymn, and blows through the congregation in a way that is beyond any rehearsal, plan, or order of worship. God is with us.

The texts of the anthems we sing teach us about God, and help us grow in our faith. Sometimes, when

we’re faced with a week’s challenges or joys, the words of a hymn or anthem we’ve rehearsed come to mind and speak to our need. The texts become not just our song, but our meditation and our prayer.

One memorable example of this was when we were rehearsing the anthem “E’en So, Lord Jesus, Quickly Come,” by Paul Manz, and our director, Charles Olson, told us the background of the piece. It had been written when Manz’s infant son was critically ill. One night as they changed watch at their son’s bedside, the composer’s wife suggested a text that promised comfort from Revelation 22. Manz worked through the night on a composition based on this text, and that joy expressed in the climax of the anthem was realized when their son was saved from death and recovered to full health.

On Sunday morning we sang that anthem knowing what the composer faced when he wrote it, knowing how his faith had been tested, and knowing that in the face of it all, he wrote these words: “Rejoice in heaven, all ye that dwell therein, rejoice on earth, ye saints below. For Christ is coming, is coming soon! E’en so Lord Jesus, quickly come, and night shall be no more; they need no light nor lamp, nor sun, for Christ will be their All!”

In a choir, you can’t really be a loner. When you join a choir, you are automatically a member of a small group—a small group that makes music together and in doing so, becomes a family. At every



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rehearsal, we take a few minutes to share our individual or congregational joys, sorrows, or prayer requests, and we pray together. We study the texts of the anthems, and we reflect on their meaning not just at rehearsal, but throughout the week. We know each others' bad musical habits, but we love each other anyway, because we are a family. We have potluck suppers, watch choir romances blossom, celebrate birthdays, and grieve our losses together, and doing these things *together* makes the difference for us.

Many members of our choir have sung for decades, through various choir directors, organists, and choir members, and we thus have a deep sense of our heritage. When anthems are distributed for rehearsal, we are at the same time reminded of our history and confronted with our

mortality, because ours may be the piece of music with one of our former choir members' names written in the corner (in pencil of course) with their notes on when to breathe and how to pronounce the text. Although these former members now sing with the saints in heaven, we remember where they sat, the jokes they told, or their favorite anthem. When we sing, perhaps even holding their music, we know that they are among our cloud of witnesses.

Singing in the choir gives us a prime location—a front and center view of our congregation. From the choir loft, we count the hats on Easter Sunday (down to five last Easter), watch the trustees as they hurriedly assemble their offering-taking team during the preceding hymn, and witness the drama when that stray cup

tips over in the balcony, dripping coffee on someone's head directly below. We see the new baby's first trip to church, the one returning after a long absence, the new widow attending church alone for the first time, and the visitor we make a mental note to find after the service.

More reverently, we enjoy the privilege of watching the faces of our congregation as their lives unfold before us: the face of the one being baptized, the confirmand's face while surrounded by family members and friends during the pastor's prayer, and the faces of grieving family members during a memorial service. We watch them sing with fierce determination in the midst of their sorrow, and in their faces we witness the power of our shared belief in the resurrection.

The lesson we learn from singing in a choir is that it's a lot like life in the church. We are a part of the body of Christ—we each do our part, given our strengths and weaknesses, out of our gifts and interests, and somehow God uses us imperfect people to do powerful things. As we live in community, we form strong bonds, and we become a family. We are connected—we can't be in broken relationships because we've sung together. We make it work. We rehearse until we get it right. We keep on singing. We sing more quietly when we need to, stepping out of the way for a more important part, and sing more boldly when it's time. We honor and remember those who went before us, but we welcome the stranger. We see Christ in our midst and in the faces of our congregation. And through it all, despite our need to control and our failed attempts to get it right, God surprises us, moving in our midst in a way that defies our understanding.

This is my anthem to my choir, and ultimately, to life in the church. ■

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