

Introduction

The Basis for Caring

What unique characters inhabit our choir rooms and choir lofts! They are busy and lazy, experienced and rookie, self-assured and hesitant, expert and clueless. They overlook our flaws and search for them. They sing in our choir because of us and in spite of us. They come out of conviction and out of habit. They strive for God's glory and for self-gratification. They are our soul mates and our enigmas. They are a lot like us and they couldn't be more different.

And in what unique surroundings we find ourselves! We gather in state-of-the-art music suites and church basements, surrounded by Gothic tracery and peeling paint. We rehearse with pianos that are grand and un-grand, upright and downright rotten. We arrive and depart via well-lit parking lots and walkways, and we feel more secure if we can come and go in a group.

And what unique sounds our choirs make! They sing in Latin and Swahili, German and Chinese, Spanish and English. They swallow, roll, or completely ignore their R's. They render their vowels with elocutionary precision, and they are diphthongally-challenged. They make use of octavos and song sheets, missals and memory. They sing chants and canciones, motets and responses, masses and estribillos, cantatas and specials, chorales and spirituals. They produce heavenly, transcendent euphony and earthy, indigenous cacophony.

And then there are the unique ones who direct these groups! We are under-qualified and over-qualified, over-paid, barely-paid, and not paid. We got our positions after grueling interviews and auditions, and by raising our hands. We do what we do because we feel called by God, and to earn a paycheck. We spend hours preparing for each rehearsal, and we wing it. We wear a special church persona over our real selves, and our lives are open books. We believe our ministry is of utmost importance, and we wonder why we waste our time. We strive to please God, to please others, to please ourselves.

What all church choir musicians hold most in common just might be our diversity.

Yet, beneath all these vast differences lies a common foundation — a reality so strong and so profound that it transcends all that might seem to divide us. That unifying factor is *response*. We have been given a gift, and it begs acknowledgement. Baptism planted a seed, and it has been steadily growing; it ignited a spark that has been smoldering and glowing in us ever since. Through baptism God forgave us, saved us, marked us, connected us to Christ and to each other, and we just can't be quiet about it. Our abilities to sing, or to learn, or to work hard, or to be a team player were not among those gifts granted at the font. But, along with the rest of our human characteristics, these abilities were granted a new focus, a new calling, a new energy, all at that moment when those wet words were heard and felt. "All things are mine since I am his! How can I keep from singing?" asks Robert Lowry in his hymn of the same name. It's a rhetorical question, of course. "What am I to do? I can't help it!" answers Marlene Dietrich. A gift calls for a response.

Baptism is a force that not only calls but levels. Our choir members may have varying degrees of talent, training, intuition, and dependability, but no one dare deny their equality or their value in God's eyes. When we are granted that rare but transforming glimpse of each other — and ourselves — through God's

eyes, we soon realize that our differences are of miniscule importance. Our common salvation is a much greater reality than our individual variances.

Furthermore, that individual gifts are so widely different does not disprove the elevating and leveling properties of baptism — it supports it. Just as we cannot all be sopranos, altos, tenors, or basses, so we cannot all be directors, accompanists, or soloists — or even singers, for that matter. Good order requires a division of duties and roles. Good order honors God, proclaims the gospel, and edifies people. Good order shows respect for another's baptism.

I hope you catch the irony in the title of this book. The phrase *preaching to the choir* is invoked when someone is trying to claim that time and energy is being wasted on a group that is already on board. "Better to focus elsewhere" is the implication. While this tactic may be true in many arenas — such as some political campaigns — this is not the paradigm for the baptized. Choir members, as human individuals, are always deserving of love and concern, and there will always be more that can be learned, experienced, and contemplated living under the reign of God. Just as choir robes don't make us any more perfect, they also don't make us any less needy or less deserving than others. Joined together into a choir, we are individually and collectively caretakers for each other and for all God's people in that place. We are spiritual leaders to those whom God has mysteriously called into this specific relationship. Such a high calling dare not be ignored or even treated lightly.

An intense vocational awareness is our wish for all the baptized. We seek it for ourselves, we wish it for each and every person, and we strive to help make it happen for all within our grasp. We can encourage and foster a more profound understanding of God's call — ours and theirs — as we go about our jobs as church musicians. It is often in the *whats* and the *hows* and the *whens* of our regular encounters that we can truly *preach to the choir*.

"Feed my lambs; tend my sheep," Jesus asked of Peter (John 21:15-17). We certainly cannot do the feeding and tending on our own. But God has supplied us with platters overloaded with the grace that comforts, challenges, convinces, and conveys what is needed. And we have been empowered to be *tender* and to be *tenders* for each other. It is an awesome responsibility — but an even more awesome opportunity. Let us explore some ways we directors — in a sense pastors to this flock — might think and act about our calling.

—Wayne L. Wold

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