

# **Preaching to the Choir**

The Care and Nurture  
of the Church Choir

Second Edition

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Augsburg Fortress  
Minneapolis

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## 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

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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 homespun cacophony.

And then there are the unique ones who direct these groups! We are underqualified and overqualified, overpaid, 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. We are the eccentrics who can exclaim, “Thank God, it’s Monday!”

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 acknowledgment. Baptism planted a seed, and it has been growing steadily; that water and that word 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

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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 would 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 minuscule 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 choir 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 are 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.

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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 about and act out our calling.

Wayne L. Wold

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TO THE SECOND EDITION

**Better Than Just  
“Back to the Way It Was”**

It has been twenty years since I took my notes from the numerous workshops I had presented on this topic, expanded upon them, and put them together to create the first edition of *Preaching to the Choir: The Care and Nurture of the Church Choir* (2003). It has been gratifying to hear how my thoughts on the topic have been appreciated by many choir directors and to hear that my book has been used as a textbook in church music and worship courses in several colleges and seminaries. It is true that many books are outdated even by the time they are published, and the field of church music is no exception. Ours is an ever-evolving, ever-expanding field, and we are at our best when we keep learning, growing, experiencing, and responding to this vast world.

So, what might I say twenty years later? Well, I am twenty years older and twenty years more experienced, as you are. We hope we are at least a few years wiser. Or perhaps you have entered the world of church music within the last few years and find all of this quite new. Welcome to our unique and wonderful world!



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What are some of the changes we have seen? What passed for musical variety and diversity twenty years ago pales in comparison to the present time as we now encounter a quite different society with new tensions and shifted priorities and a church scene with new challenges and heightened levels of awareness. How we understand “inclusiveness” is much broader and much more complex than our initial encounters with the concept. Technology of twenty years ago is now almost ancient history, and I had to edit and update quite a few references to such things as cassette tapes, postcards, and other relics of the past and replace them with other terms that no doubt will be outdated twenty years from now. In addition, I would guess that our all-volunteer choirs are on average a few members smaller than they were twenty years ago, and perhaps the average age of our singers has slipped upward a bit. How could we not have seen *then* what we are so well aware of *now*?

And then, there was this little thing that hit in 2020 called COVID-19. As I write this there is a new optimism that the worst is over, that things are returning to normal, and hope is rising that we can all get back to the way things were before “this recent unpleasantness.” But we are not the same people we were in 2019. We are not the same world. We are not the same society. We are not the same church. And you and I are not the same individuals. “Preaching to the choir” should not and cannot be the same as it once was. We may react with sadness over the loss of some treasured traditions, and that is OK. But in many areas, we can do better than what we used to do prepandemic, better than just “back to the way it was.” This new reality will be addressed in an entirely new chapter and referenced throughout this new edition (see chapter six).

The first edition of *Preaching to the Choir* did not pay much attention to the fact that some churches rely on all volunteers to fill their choir chairs, that some church choirs are made up entirely of paid singers, and that some choirs are a mixture of both. My focus in the first edition was clearly on working with volunteers. But, other than for matters relating to recruiting volunteers versus hiring professionals, I make the claim that nothing else should change in how we view and treat our singers. Yes,

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we may have to be more accommodating to our volunteers since, with them, we do not have specific responsibilities laid out in a contractual agreement, but even paid singers are individuals created by God, persons with their own life challenges, and they are equally deserving of care. The best paid singers are those who blend into the fabric of the entire choir, treat the volunteers around them with respect, and fully involve themselves in the spirit of worship. We can foster those relationships. I leave for others to address the various aspects of finding, hiring, evaluating, and, if necessary, dismissing paid singers, but for this new edition I have added a chapter just on the topic of recruiting volunteers (see chapter four).

The first edition did not attempt to address the many facets of working with children and youth in our churches. That omission was intentional, and I make no attempt to cover the topic in this edition either. Developing the young voice—and, of course, the person behind that voice—is a specialty that takes much knowledge, experience, patience, respect, and love. I leave that vast topic to those with much greater expertise than I have, and I encourage you to learn all you can about the uniqueness of children's voices, their learning styles, and their many possibilities. Churches too often underestimate what children can comprehend and what they can do, especially when it comes to worship and music. We call them “the church of the future” while totally ignoring that in God's eyes they are no less “the church of the present” than our oldest members. We adults can learn so much from young musicians, yet we often relegate their leadership to anyone who volunteers, their repertoire to the simplistic, and their offerings to anything that is cute. And then we wonder why they drift away. As I said, I leave this important topic to the experts, and I encourage you to pursue knowledge and insight from them. But let me state strongly that the underlying theme of this book—the equality of each person and their deserving of the best of our concern and care—has no age limit.

In one of my recent presentations on this overall topic, one attendee asked an unusual question that I found to be quite profound and even

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prophetic. The inquirer was a teacher in a public school who also served as the children's choir director in her church. The gist of her question to me was this: "I appreciate how you base your rationale for caring and nurturing on baptism, how it elevates and equalizes each one of us. But how do I take that concept into my classroom full of children from various cultures and various faith traditions, including none?" What followed were several seconds of wonderful silence as everyone in the room pondered that question, and I felt all eyes on me, from whom a response was expected! I hope my words that eventually broke the silence were able to provide a few morsels to chew on. "As important and dynamic as holy baptism is to our theology, it should never imply an us-them relationship with the rest of the world; we are not one set of insiders plus another set of outsiders but rather one community. As the baptized, we are freed, blessed, and called to serve—equally—all people. Especially in worship we are manifesting God's new world order, and through the liturgy we are rehearsing our place in that world, extending God's grace to all we encounter." That was an inadequate answer at the time, and it still is, but I plan to continue working on a response more befitting such an important question.

Lastly, the definition of "choir" has changed in many places over the last twenty years. While this book speaks mostly about groups of singers who, under a director, sing a variety of choral literature from across the ages, many of the same topics and concerns can apply equally to worship bands—by whatever name they use—plus dance ensembles, handbell choirs, and all other vocal and instrumental combinations we find in our churches. Praise God for the wide variety of gifts!

May this second, expanded edition assist you as you go about your ministry of music.

Wayne L. Wold  
Frederick, Maryland  
Fall 2022

## CHAPTER ONE

# Planning Ahead Is Pastoral Care

That planning ahead is a good idea should come as a lightning bolt to no one. We would all agree that it is a good idea, we should do it when we can, and we should try to make the best of those situations when we did not or could not. But planning ahead is mostly for our own sake, isn't it? We would rather avoid that anxiety, of course, but haven't we learned to cope well enough to get by on a week-to-week basis? Isn't winging it a valuable skill and worthy art in itself?

There are numerous pitfalls to "just getting by" in the planning-ahead department. One is the inherent lack of vision. How can we analyze and adjust our balance of repertoire (see chapter two) unless we can view the bigger, longer-term picture? Some directors plan out (and publicize!) their repertoire an entire year in advance. Others, especially those who have to gauge their repertoire upon a fluctuating number of voices and voicings, find that a few weeks or a single liturgical season is the best they can do. But choosing music on a week-to-week basis is like stamping out fires as they flare up or playing a frustrating game of whack-a-mole. It can lead us to lose sight of the greater task at hand, and opportunities

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for better pastoral care are squandered as we jump from one emergency to the next. Neither imbalance in the repertoire nor uneasiness in the choir loft shows pastoral care. Adequate planning is a crucial element of good liturgy, of good relations within the staff, of accountability with our parishioners, of our own well-being, and—our *cantus firmus* here—of caring for our choir members.

### THE BASICS

It should go without saying that the primary goal of our planning is to get pieces ready on time. The director must allow adequate time to learn and understand each piece, to develop a teaching plan, to teach it, and to allow each choir member to truly learn it. (It also may be necessary to allow even more time if we need to acquire the printed music.) We want to introduce each new piece positively and winsomely, to plant the seed of anticipation for the next level of learning it, to build enthusiasm for the end result, and to empower each singer with the skill, knowledge, and security to successfully present it. But that doesn't always happen.

Two extreme examples, related to me by individuals who experienced them firsthand, may help inspire and affirm (or, at least, entertain) you:

In one instance the director frequently asked the choir to sit quietly during the rehearsal while he studied the music and determined “how it should go.” This often went on for several minutes at a time!

In another setting, a mediator was called in to discuss friction between choir and director. “How much of the rehearsal time should we expect the director to be in the room with us?” asked a choir representative. The mediator was baffled by such a question and wondered what could have been its source. “How about—*all the time!*” she wanted to say. And just where was that choir director whom the choir members felt should

be in the room with them during rehearsals? Either in the next room getting music out of file cabinets or in the church office photocopying music for that very rehearsal!

There—don't you feel better about yourself? But simply staying in the room for the entire rehearsal and choosing (or copying!) music beforehand is still not pastoral enough. Allowing enough time for the director to prepare is only the first step. Sufficient choir preparation time must follow. For many of us, and for most of our careers, adequate time probably meant anywhere from four to six weeks to prepare an average anthem, a few more weeks to rehearse larger works, and just a single rehearsal for most hymns (harmonizations and descants) and liturgical music (verses or antiphons). Such a time frame may still hold true for much of our repertoire. But many of us may not have adjusted our procedures as our musical palettes widened. Polyphony is a new frontier for those whose past experience was largely homophonic. And monophony, whether singing plainsong or folksong, can be both too simple and too complex for first-time users.

If we are reasonably at home with a healthy smattering of Renaissance and Baroque motets and chorales, Classical and Romantic masses and choruses, later pieces that are modeled after these past eras, and some of the more common sounds and genres of the twentieth century, then many new pieces will have a ring of familiarity about them. They belong to the same stylistic canon; our mind's ear knows what to expect. But the varied repertoire many of us now feel called to bring to our people may need more than this business-as-usual approach. While it is true that music notation is never an exact science, it is even less precise when trying to convey the varied ethnic and non-Western sounds now knocking at the doors of our choir rooms and naves. New styles—even short pieces of a simple texture—need more lead time so their flavor can be caught. This varied repertoire requires more time for the director to study, more time for the learning process, and more time for the singers to discover its message and make it their own.

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Many musicians are aware of numerous performance practices when rendering Western music. We know to double-dot the rhythm in pieces which are in the French overture style; we play *notes inégales* at certain points in French Classic literature; we ornament melodies when they return in many works in ABA form. Such indications do not appear on the printed page, often because such practices were so widespread at the time and therefore assumed and also because our notational system cannot convey such subtleties. So we try to become knowledgeable and fluent in any number of these many styles so that we can render them more authentically and more effectively. Our goal is the full and final product rather than just mastering the separate ingredients.

Sometimes even the best-trained and most savvy musicians forget to extend the concept of performance practices to music outside the Western art canon. But music in the various popular styles and that which comes from cultures around the world can also rightfully claim their own performance practices. In many syncopated styles, for example, we may be able to get all the rhythms correct but still fall short of expressing their flavor until we live with them for a while and internalize them.

European hymns are often stylized by shifting into compound meter ( $4/4$  becomes  $12/8$ , for example) in gospel music. Much traditional Latin music often alternates measures of  $6/8$  and  $3/4$ , requiring frequent shifting of the accents. These and other stylistic variations can catch even seasoned singers off guard, making them feel insecure and self-conscious. The quality of worship also suffers when musicians are uncomfortable and provide half-hearted, apologetic leadership. Skill and artistry are built over time through creative repetition and thoughtful reflection, no matter the style of the music.

We honor the musical treasures of the past and present, dignify the individuals and cultures who created them, intensify our worship of God, and provide pastoral care for our people as we plan ahead in our music selections and then use that lead time to adequately prepare.