

The Choir As Worship Leader



Worship Leaders

by [Ron Man](#)

Pastor of Music and Worship, EXW Contributor

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PART 1

Revitalizing the Ministry of the Loft

Make no mistake about it: the most important musical group in the church is the congregation. Worship is for all of God's people; the New Testament doctrine of the priesthood of all believers calls for the saints to lift up their voices (whether musically gifted or not) in a unified chorus of praise and adoration to God.

However, that is not to say that gifted and trained musicians do not have an important contribution to make to the worship life of God's people. Old Testament worship gave a crucial role to the Levitical musicians, who were set apart vocationally to provide this ministry to Israel. Moody has his Sankey, Graham had his Shea: the point being that the proclamation of God's truth takes place in musical form as well as in the spoken word, and the Word of God must be central in every portion of our services.

To be sure, the standard choral contribution of call to worship/anthem/response is a bit tired, and certainly unworthy of the potential of those most gifted and equipped to prompt and model worship. I dare say, in most churches where choirs are not motivated or where morale or attendance is a problem, the cause is not that this ministry places too many demands on them, but rather that they are not being truly challenged to minister with excellence and to step up to a new level of leadership in the worship of God's people. The choir certainly fits the role of "prompter" designated by Kierkegaard for those up front (with God as the "audience" and the congregation as the "performers"); choir members can use their special gifts in a powerful way in inviting and leading God's people in worship.

Support for Congregational Singing

A corollary to the fact that the congregation is the primary musical group in the church, is that the primary function of the choir is to help the congregation sing better. The choir is not to be a performing group where the musical elite of the church prepare and present aesthetic delights to the wonder of the rank and file. Rather they are to use their gifts to undergird, support, enhance, strengthen, and embellish the corporate ministry of song.

The most obvious contribution which a choir can make is that of sonic support for the people's song: in terms of volume (especially in a room which is on the dead side acoustically), depth (strengthening the bass), fullness (adding harmony by singing in parts), and tempo (helping to set and maintain it). In addition, the presence of a choir singing in parts makes possible effective a cappella singing at climactic or reflective moments.

PART 2

Special Musical Contributions

In addition to sonically supporting congregational song, the choir can enhance the people's worship in some important other ways as well.

The Anthem

With today's healthy reemphasis on the critical importance of congregational participation in worship, let it also be said that there is still a place for the choral anthem. The presentation of an anthem weaves together the creative art of the composer and lyricist with the disciplined preparation and careful execution of the singers; and if all of that is infused with spiritual understanding on the part of writer and presenter and listener, and presented to God as a gift on the behalf of the entire congregation, then the result is anything but "performance" -- rather it is a spiritual sacrifice in which all play important roles, and through which hearts may be inflected towards true worship.

For the anthem to realize its potential in enhancing worship, it should be carefully chosen out of the vast array of available repertoire, with due consideration being given to the quality of text and music (in that order), the ability of the choir, and the taste of the congregation. (Not that the envelope should never be pushed in terms of expanding the people's horizons, but this must be done gradually so as not to needlessly offend-- worship must always remain the goal.) In addition, the preponderance of anthems chosen should have God-centered texts-- those which deal with the Christian experience do have a place, but the dominant focus must always be the Person of God.

Some anthems become familiar to and beloved by the congregation over time, and the people may get to the point where they feel like joining in. Why not let them? Even Handel's Hallelujah Chorus can be learned and effectively sung by the congregation as a whole.

The Call to Worship

The same can be said for the choral call to worship. The choir steps into the role of the Psalmist and invites the people of God to "worship and bow down," to "kneel before the Lord our Maker" (Ps. 95:6) At this point the choir is actually extending God's invitation to His children to come before Him and rejoice. (But beware the danger of losing the power of a call to worship by making it too rote and predictable: sing it sometimes, read it sometimes, and sometimes leave it out altogether!)

New Life for Hymnody

Contrary to the belief of some in today's churches, hymns are not irrelevant to today's church. It is dangerous to maintain that we have nothing to learn from the worship expressions of great men and women of the past (surely we would not want to start over on the Psalms??). The Psalmist calls on the people of God to "sing unto the Lord a new song," and indeed each generation has the opportunity if not the responsibility to articulate its faith in fresh ways; but lest we think that the Psalmist was suggesting that "the only good song is a new song," let us remember that the Psalms themselves were written over a span of twelve hundred years and collected and used in worship long after they were eligible for the designation of "the latest thing out there" (including throughout two thousand years of church history)!

Hymnsinging is not irrelevant; but poor hymnsinging is certainly irrelevant! It is also unnecessary: the choir can lead the congregation in worshipful, energetic, and enthusiastic renditions of the great hymns of the faith. There is nothing quite like the power and the majesty of a well-sung and deeply-felt hymn like "Crown Him with Many Crowns" or "All Creatures of Our God and King."

PART 3

Flow

The choir (along with the accompanists) can provide transitions and links which will enhance worship by allowing for a seamless fabric without a lot of interruptions and verbal instructions. Interspersing musical segments for choir alone among those which include the congregation helps to keep the service moving, while giving those in the congregation a breather and a chance to listen and reflect rather than singing nonstop (which might be more taxing and wearying for them). Our choir members will have up to sixteen sheets of music in their folders on a given Sunday (not including the anthem); the "roadmap" can then sometimes be more challenging than

the music (!), but a choir can be taught to keep the momentum and flow of a service going by providing musical connectivity.

It is simply not necessary (especially in larger churches) to move to a praise team setup in order to provide such elements in the service. Our choirs are capable of more than we sometimes give them credit for.

Be sure to always provide for the people even the texts which they are not singing (in the bulletin, on overhead, or whatever medium you use) so that they can understand and respond to the texts without having to strain to make them out.

Segments for Choir Alone

A variety of choral segments can be woven into the service: these will aid in developing the theme of the service, will provide a richer palette of textual/ musical/ emotional development, and will give the people's voices a break, and will allow for more congregational reflection and response.

Anthem Excerpts.

This is a rich reservoir which goes untapped in most churches. In most choirs' repertoires there are an abundance of anthems which are familiar to the choir (and to the congregation); these can often can be excerpted (a verse or a refrain, for instance) and used to help develop a theme. (These excerpts can be legally photocopied for use by the choir as long as the anthems in their entirety are owned by the church.)

For instance, when we have a service focusing on the holiness of God (usually using David's Clydesdale's "Holy Is He" as the anthem), the choir will sing at various points relevant excerpts from Cindy Berry's "Thou Art Worthy," Ed Willmington's "We All Sing Holy," Kenny Woods' and Billy Crockett's "The Lord Is Lifted Up," and Jimmy Owens' "Holy, Holy," interspersed among the verses of the hymn "Holy, Holy, Holy" sung by the congregation.

Why use these marvelous anthems only once a year or so, when they can be used so effectively in this way also? (Incidentally, a side benefit is that when the anthem is later used in its entirety it will be more recognizable to the congregation, and its impact will be thus increased.) It's time that we take another look at our anthem libraries and mine them for effective worship materials!

PART 4

Hymn Transitions and Modulations.

The revitalization of hymnody can also be furthered through the sparing use of appropriate choral transitions. The sweep and grandeur of a great hymn can be magnified through a powerful modulating choral/organ interlude into the final verse.

Hymn Descants.

Similarly, the use of a soaring soprano descant on the final verse of a hymn can add to its expressive force and emotional impact.

Unfamiliar Songs.

The choir can add to the thematic development of a service by singing a song (hymn, chorus, or whatever) which fits the them particularly well, but which the congregation simply does not know. This allows for the inclusion of some great texts which might not otherwise be usable. (Sometimes another option with an unfamiliar hymn would be to pair the text with a more familiar tune of the same meter, using the metrical index found in most hymnals.

Teaching New Songs.

This technique is often used, and very effectively: the choir sings a new song (hymn, chorus, etc.) for the congregation and, if it is simple enough, the people may join in the second or third time. For more difficult songs, it may be advisable to let the choir sing it for a Sunday or two before the congregation takes it on.

Other Aspects of the Choir's Ministry

True Worship Leadership

It is important that choir members understand their role as one of ministry rather than performance. They are first and foremost offering up a gift to God, and then (and only then) to the congregation. Their sacrifices of praise must come from a willing and committed heart if they are to be acceptable worship (Ps. 4:4-5; 51:17). They must have an attitude of service, striving to give of their best energies and abilities for their God.

Choir members must also see that they are in positions of leadership, with all the conditions, cautions, and blessings which accompany spiritual leadership. Their director and their pastor should openly and regularly affirm them and seek to instill esteem for their ministry on the part of the congregation.

Group leadership of worship also releases the worship leader/choir director from being the sole point person, with all the accompanying dangers: succumbing to the "star syndrome," perceiving the need to be strongly extroverted, feeling that he must make worship "happen." He can (indeed, should) function as a facilitator, for the choir as well as for the congregation; however, he can allow the choir to lead, thus taking some focus off himself and hopefully receding into the background, as the people look to the God Whom they are worshipping.

To further dissipate focus on individuals, which can distract worshippers from giving their full attention to God, any soloists used can always wear robes and sit (and stand) with the choir.

PART 5

Spiritual Preparation

Choir member must understand that, in order to lead effectively lead in worship, they must come prepared spiritually as well as musically. They must come to their place of service having walked with and worshipped God throughout the week, that they might be ready to invite others to join in corporate expressions of adoration.

Expressiveness

Expressiveness in the choir's public ministry must be genuine, arising out of the heart's response of praise to God; and it must be directed, intended not as an end in itself, but rather as a gift of adoring gratitude to God and as a winsome invitation for others to respond in like fashion.

Expressiveness can begin on the musical level, with articulation and coloring which do justice to the texts being sung. In addition, physical expressions are an appropriate response to God in corporate worship, though as leaders those up front must strike a delicate balance between genuineness of expression and sensitivity to the particular congregation and its range of "acceptable" expression in corporate worship. (Though that range can and probably should be expanded, that must be done over time and not in a way which offends or distracts or alienates, thus detracting from the main focus for gathering together: to worship God as a corporate entity.) Facial expressions are certainly acceptable in even the staidest of congregations; and it should never be assumed that more boisterous displays are necessary in order to communicate one's

feelings either to God or to other worshippers. Indeed, the expressions on the faces of those in the choir can be a real inducement to worship, if those expressions communicate a deeply-held faith in the truths being sung, an abiding joy in reflecting on the things of God, and an obvious experience of genuine worship.

Readings

Besides musical offerings, the choir can contribute other verbal declarations of truth to worship services. In responsive readings, the choir can serve as another group separate from, and alternating with, the leader and the congregation. Other Scripture readings, in unison or in alternating groups, may also be assigned solely to the choir (choral readings); this can be especially effective over a musical crescendo from the instruments. The choir can even interject accentuations to a leader's reading (for example, reinforcing each of the series of nouns attributed to God in a reading of Revelation 5:12).

Conclusion

In her book *Worship Evangelism*, Sally Morgenthaler states:

As a rule, choirs are neither trained nor used [in an] intensive enabling role. Their contribution to the weekly service is usually limited to performing an anthem or two and perhaps adding fullness to congregational singing. . . . I believe choirs can be used to teach and lead worship . . . if the appropriate training is given and certain adjustments are made. . . . It is doubtful that a choir's abilities in teaching and leading will ever quite match that of a trained worship team; but there is certainly a potential here that is not being tapped at present. (p. 236)

Morgenthaler at least sees more possibilities for the choir than are usually realized; but I believe she still underestimates the potential and power of a choir leading corporately in worship.

Before we too readily scrap the choir for praise teams (because of an assumed greater flexibility or ability or mike-ability), let us give careful consideration to the multitude of ways in which a well-trained and well-taught choir can rise to the occasion of true leadership in worship. Praise Teams can do many of these same things; but let us not too quickly give up on the choir or assume that they are incapable of keeping up or of learning something new.

At our church the members of the Worship Choir (as we have named the adult choir to reflect its true purpose and goal) have learned to see their role of leading in worship, and indeed are esteemed and appreciated as worship leaders by the members of the congregation. No recruitment gimmicks are needed: God raises up those who aspire to the incredible privilege described in our Worship Ministry's purpose statement: