

# The Ministry of the Multiple Choir Program

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It was a downtown Methodist church in a large west coast city. The congregation attending Sunday evening service was growing smaller and smaller.

In an effort to provide meaningful activity for their own junior age children, the pastor's wife and the choir director's wife formed a junior choir. Rehearsals were scheduled for Sunday evenings during the youth hour. The first evening thirty-six bright-eyed juniors came for rehearsal. Nearly all of them, with their parents, stayed for the evening service. The size of the congregation was increased by a hundred. Overjoyed, the pastor remarked, "I don't care whether the choir ever sings or not. This boost to the evening service is worth the effort." Soon the children were singing at regular intervals at both morning and evening services, to the delight of parents and other worshipers.

Families formerly apathetic about evening church attendance became actively involved in the program of the church. Within three years there developed from one adult and one junior choir a six-choir program. In this way an active music program greatly strengthened the church during a period of uncertainty.

Many a pastor is confronted with the problem of a diminishing attendance in his evening service. Sometimes the congregation is so small, being made up of the "faithful few," that the pastor is tempted to devote only the "tagends" of his time in preparation for the service. The choir director and organist likewise are inclined to let up in their efforts, and the whole service ends up a second-class affair.

Some feel that the Sunday Evening Service, with its emphasis on evangelism, is a relic of the past. They reason, with good cause, that since the unsaved no longer attend, the service is no longer needed. Others grimly "hang on," feeling that to do away with the service is to let down the bars to admit increasingly the tide of secularism which seems to be gradually inundating the church. There is truth in both points of view.

The status of the church in the community has changed. No longer does social life revolve around the church. It is the school that dictates the activities, with the church and civic affairs being adjusted to a calendar of sports, fine arts, and social events.

Church membership is no longer a significant status symbol of community life. It is a private matter, not material to the individual's credit rating or to his integrity.

Sunday is no longer the Lord's Day, even to church members generally. It is the universal "day off"—a perfect setting for sports and other forms of entertainment, legitimate activities in themselves.

People have more leisure time than ever before and greater opportunities for recreation. The result is that we are busier. We drive farther. We belong to more organizations. All this tends to encroach upon the time traditionally given to the church. Midweek church services are discouraging affairs. Organizational or business meetings have to be scheduled on Sunday. Choir rehearsals compete against all forms of interests outside the church.

A generation ago competition was popular. The church was affected by it. Great preachers drew crowds by their oratory. The term "special music" entered the church vocabulary. Newspaper advertisements extolled the virtues of this preacher and that singer in an effort to fill the churches. Church vied with church. When the word "sensationalism" became attached to the work of the church, the "competitive" form of outreach fell into disrepute.

For generations the church at the local level was organized to evangelize the lost and build up the saints. The Wesleyan Class Meeting did this in the early days of Methodism. Of more recent origin is the Sunday school. Later came an emphasis on youth programs, as for instance, The Methodist Youth Fellowship. Both Sunday school and youth work continue to be effective in many churches. Other churches, however, find their Sunday schools anemic, adding little to the life of the church. In too many instances the youth service has developed into an hour of social activity.

In recent years a third program within the church has proved to be effective. Used to its fullest power, it is a worthy means of training in worship and churchmanship, and even in evangelism. The Multiple Choir Program involves the organization and training of children, young people, and adults in church music. It begins customarily with youngsters in the first grade and culminates with the service choir of adults. Happy is the church whose adult choir is reaping the results of years of training through the Multiple Choir Program.

At first glance it might seem that this program is too selective, of service only to children with fine voices. This is not true. The Program provides opportunity for all young people to learn to sing. One minister of music insists that all are welcome, including the child who cannot carry a tune. "This is my challenge," he explains. "I would no more keep a child out of choir for not singing properly than I would expect a Sunday school teacher to ostracize the child who didn't know his Bible stories."

It is true that not all who come up through the Program end up in the service choir. This would be too much to hope for. It does, however, bring out both young people and adults. It cultivates in them a reverence for the sanctuary. It encourages them to participate both intellectually and emotionally in the worship experience. Joining in the great hymns of the Church can be for all a rich experience. This kind of congregation worship becomes real. A people brought up in this kind of atmosphere is not easily swayed by every club or civic event which beckons.

How can the Multiple Choir Program help the church with its evening service? A pastor in Georgia realized an increased attendance when the children's choir began to participate in the evening service. He arranged for one of the younger choirs to sing at each service. Soon entire families were attending to hear the children.

As the young choristers grew enthusiastic about their work, they attracted their unchurched friends. As a result, non-Christian parents began to attend the evening services. Eventually many of these were integrated into the church. The pastor began to see the evangelistic possibilities of the Program.

The writer's wife was invited to organize a Multiple Choir Program in a church in San Gabriel, California. The church, under the leadership of the minister of Christian Education, was well prepared; and on the day of the first rehearsal one hundred sixty-five children joined four choirs. Six weeks later, on Palm Sunday, the combined choirs opened the morning worship with a Palm Processional. They were dressed in new robes made by women in the church, under the direction of a professional seamstress who was a dedicated Christian.

This was a neighborhood church ministering through the Sunday school to many youngsters whose families had never been to the church. These parents had consistently refused invitations from pastor and church visitors to attend revivals, Bible conferences, or adult Sunday school classes. After the Palm Sunday performance the pastor noticed that the next scheduled choir appearance was for Children's Day. He arranged for written invitations to be sent to the parents. The result? A church full of visitors and later five conversions definitely attributed to attendance at the Children's Day program. Within a year the children were evidencing strong loyalties to the services of the church. Families cancelled plans which interfered with choir rehearsals. Children chose church activities in preference to school plans.

Well chosen choir music will improve the taste of the singers. After a few years of choir training a high school freshman gave away her extensive collection of rock-and-roll records. "After the good music we've been singing in choir at church, I don't like rock-and-roll anymore," was her comment.

The Multiple Choir Program involves a great deal of organization and planning. It requires the assistance of about one adult for each ten or twelve children. Accompanists are needed. Directors and assistant directors must be trained. Helpers for attendance, robing, line-up, and the myriad of details of preparation and performance are required.

Graded choirs are easily organized in churches of all sizes. The church with limited leadership can begin with one choir but should place a definite age restriction on choir membership. Children in grades four, five, and six are the easiest and best with which to work. After a year or two it might be possible to organize the more self-conscious seventh and eighth graders. Primary children will be clamoring for a choir of their own.

Recognizing the need for adequately trained personnel in the realm of church music, colleges and seminaries have included music courses in their curriculum. Qualified church musicians are thus constantly being released into the main stream of the church's life.

In a very real sense the ministry of music influences every department of the church. It is pedagogical—teaching Christian truth, principle, and worship; it is evangelistic—attracting fringe people or outsiders; it is integrating—holding the attention of the otherwise uninterested until they become concerned participants.

Perhaps the strongest ministry of music is in the area of worship. It provides an opportunity for the layman, young or old, to perform a special function of the church. Also, the ministry of music produces an understanding congregation which is appreciative and responsive because it has actively participated in the various aspects of worship. Possibly the greatest value of this ministry is the end-result of a choir of serious, sympathetic singers whose ministry to the congregation undergirds and supports the work of the pastor.