



Church Music Help Sheets

“CD” Series – for Choir Directors

Starting a Choir

CD1

This sheet is intended to provide a list of considerations for a person who is about to start a choir in a church which has not had a choir for some time, if ever, ie where there are no established guidelines on the arrangements which have to be made.

First step. Discuss with the Minister or Priest your interest in starting a choir and make sure that he/she supports the idea. Remember that the role of the choir can be a significant element in the worship of the congregation and the person you are talking to is responsible for the conduct of that worship.

Be ready for questions on your ideas on the role of a choir in worship and the kind of music your proposed choir might present. You may find some of the points made in Help Sheets CD 5 and Rev 2 useful. If the idea comes to the surface that the choir might try to “take over” the worship, find out what is understood by the term. You may need to give some assurance that it will not happen.

A broad level of understanding between you and the Minister or Priest is desirable before you seek his/her advice on any relevant issues among those listed below.

Initial recruitment. Even if there is a nucleus of singers that you know of in the congregation, you should arrange for an announcement, written, oral or both, stating your intention to start a choir and giving at least a week's notice of a meeting of all interested people. Make sure that the time of the meeting suits most, if not all, of the people you know about already.

At the meeting, get agreement on a regular practice time. Most church choirs practise late in the week so that what they have rehearsed is still fresh in their minds on Sunday. Practising on Sundays before or after the choral service may be a sensible arrangement if some members live a long way from the church, as happens in country districts. Some choirs practise on a weekday in the afternoon. This generally denies entry to anyone still in the workforce and may inhibit growth from the recruitment of young people.

The meeting should also be consulted on where practices should be held. The answer is not necessarily in the church itself, especially if it is difficult to heat in winter or to ventilate in summer. Using the church does have the advantage of letting the choir practise in something like the acoustic in which they will eventually sing and with the same accompanying instrument. Pews also generally favour an upright sitting posture, giving good breathing space for the diaphragm. Armchairs in a private home have the opposite effect.

Your future choir members will also want to know what your intentions are regarding the length of the practice. Remember that people who have not been singing regularly recently find even a one-hour practice a strain to begin with. You could settle for a shorter period initially, but give notice that you intend to extend it to a longer period later if that is your intention.

In order to choose music, even for the first practice, you need to know something about the talents of your singers. If you know the key people already, you may have enough information to go on with. At your meeting a show of hands could be useful in answer to such questions as "How many of you sing tenor?," "How many of you are currently singing in another choir?" or "How many read music?" (Define "read".) Or you could use a simple written questionnaire. Do not try to get more than a vague picture from this. It is not exactly disciplined statistical research and the results may give you some amusement later when you know your choir's real capabilities better.

Supply of music. You need to be able to try various kinds of music on your choir before you go to the expense of buying new material. Go to your hymn book first. Choose some hymns and songs for the choir which are not known to the congregation and prepare them, including some in unison. If there is a church with an established choir nearby, make an arrangement to borrow music, being meticulous about returning all copies in good time and in good condition. Be patient, it may be a few months before you have a good idea of what your choir can do and you are able to purchase music with the confidence that you are getting the repertoire right.

First appearance. You would be wise to resist the temptation to go public straight away. Both you and the choir need a little time to settle down together, develop rapport and acquire some basic technique. But do not leave their first performance too long or their enthusiasm may evaporate. Practise the hymns for each Sunday so that they can sing them better from their normal places in the congregation. At the same time work on a simple repertoire of other music and at an early stage you will be able to name the date for their entry into active service and specify the music they will sing.

Place in church. Where the choir is placed for services may be determined by the architecture of the church. If you have a choice, look for a place which gives you eye-contact with the choir, whether you are the conductor only or conductor/accompanist, and preferably without neck injury if you are the latter. If you cannot get eye-contact, make sure the choir can see your signals from the instrument, ie your body language. Choose a place which allows the sound of the choir to go out to the congregation either directly or by bouncing it off a flat surface. Remember the effect of the absorption of sound by curtains, carpet and human beings. The time the sound takes to travel may also present problems if the organ pipes are significantly separated from the console or either from the choir. Consult your Minister or Priest regarding possible requirements for the position of the choir in relation to the focus of liturgical action. If there are still choices, experiment, seeking reactions from people in the congregation who can be counted on to give you a frank opinion.

Copies of any of these Help Sheets may be obtained from the Secretary of RSCM Australia, ACT Branch:
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The ACT Branch has no objection to further copies of this Help Sheet being made for distribution to people who might be helped by them, provided they are made without amendment.