



Church Music Help Sheets

“Rev” Series – for Clergy
Getting the Best out of a Small Choir **Rev2**

This sheet is intended to assist clergy to appreciate the contribution even a small choir can make to the worship of a congregation and, where appropriate, to develop the skills of the choir director.

Hymn singing. A confident lead from a group of singers, large or small, helps the congregation to lift their hearts with confidence as well. If you are responsible for choosing the hymns, you will help if you let your choir director have the hymn list before choir practice so that the hymns may be rehearsed - well-known hymns included.

If you have such a group and you give them the opportunity to prepare the hymns, do not then try to lead the congregation's singing with your own voice. Switch off your microphone or stand well away from it. It is discouraging for the choir to prepare the music as it is written in your hymn book and then have to compete with a more popular version from you. This is most likely to happen in Christmas carols and other well-known hymns which exist in several different forms. If you want to help lead the singing, find a way of attending at least the relevant part of choir practice.

Introducing new hymns. Few congregations are familiar with anything like the complete contents of their hymn book. If you have your eye on a hymn which could usefully be added to your congregation's repertoire, consult your choir director in advance. Some preliminary softening up may be considered, such as getting the choir to sing the hymn instead of an anthem some weeks beforehand or getting the organist to play it as a voluntary. By the time it goes on the hymn list for the congregation, it should be at least vaguely familiar.

Communion settings. Perhaps your congregation already has an established musical tradition relating to Holy Communion. If not, you may wish to introduce a setting or part of one. (There are some simple settings at the back of “Sing Alleluia” and “Together in Song”.) Or you may wish to add another setting to the established repertoire. Consult the choir director on the choir's ability to present the setting you are interested in or an alternative and develop together your strategy for launching the new music.

Anthems. If you use, as a focus for worship, one or more of the themes suggested by the scripture listed in a lectionary, make sure that your choir director has a copy of the whole lectionary for the year. Don't expect the choir to present an anthem which relates to your theme every Sunday unless they have a large library of music and the skills to perform it, but when they do present something relevant, you can be sure that the congregation will appreciate it.

Do not underestimate the extent to which your congregation will respond to music. It is commonly supposed that any who are not in the choir must be musically insensitive, but this is not true. Choir membership is demanding and there are people whose work and family commitments prevent them from joining. Age is another factor. And there are many others who relate to music without being able to sing themselves. A passage from scripture or a poem, set to music and sung with clear diction, can enrich the worship of your congregation.

The choir director. Don't take your choir director for granted. A lot of work goes into choosing music that is suitable for the the musical resources available, teaching it and building up the skills of the choir members. When the choir does well, remember to thank the choir director.

Few choir directors, especially in smaller churches, have any formal training in the skills associated with directing a choir, let alone a church choir. Some may have instrumental skills, but the most likely "qualification" is that of having sung in a church choir oneself. This is not to be despised; far from it. Your choir director may gain from knowing more, however, about such matters as choosing music, teaching new music, conducting a choir, various choral and vocal techniques and the relationship of music to the liturgy.

You can help your choir director to develop in the role by encouraging his/her participation in relevant workshops run by the local Branch of RSCM Australia and in the National Summer Schools held each January by the Branches in turn. If your church is already a member of RSCM Australia, make sure that your choir director sees copies of "Church Music Quarterly" (the international magazine), "One Voice" (the Australian magazine) and the ACT Newsletter. If your church is not yet a member, please contact the ACT Branch Secretary (address below) for a membership application form.

Copies of any of these Help Sheets may be obtained from the Secretary of RSCM Australia, ACT Branch:
Katharine Walker, 12 Renwick Street, Chifley, ACT 2606
Phone/Fax 6281 6666; E-mail: act.sec@rscmaustralia.org.au

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.