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**DEVELOPING YOUR
CHILDREN'S CHOIR PROGRAM**

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First Opportunities to Mentor Children

By BENNETT JOHN PORCHIRAN

When the NPM staff first asked me to write an article on mentoring children and youth in music ministry, my first reaction was: "That should be simple enough!" I've worked in music ministry for nearly forty years, and in all that time I've always had at least one children's choir and one youth choir/contemporary ensemble. When I started in this ministry, it just never occurred to me *not* to involve children and youth in liturgy. But as I began to review what I've actually been doing with these programs for children over so many years, I came to recognize different strata in how it all developed. So writing this article for you became quite a challenge. After all these years, I began to understand how my own programs with children and youth have evolved into what they have become today.

Since the focus of this article is mentoring children and youth in music ministry, let's begin by addressing the idea of "mentoring" and what it might mean to be mentors for others. By definition, the mentor is a wise and trusted teacher. When I think about how that definition applies to training others for liturgical ministry, my immediate thoughts turn to the word "witness." I have always firmly believed that all in service to the church should lead lives rooted in the message of the Gospels. Regardless of what else we might do or how well we perform our art, if our lives are not a reflection of the message of Jesus, we will only fail at ministry. Jesus is our first example of a life dedicated to the will of the Father and service to humanity.

Taking a position of leadership in the church means that we take on the responsibility of helping others as they move on their journey through life in preparation for their final destination: being reunited with our Father in heaven. If our own lives are not reflections of the life and message of Christ, we should not be in ministry, for our efforts will not only be futile but could also be damaging to those with whom we work. None of us is perfect, of course. I'm simply suggesting that our heart, vision, and disposition must first be in the right place. How we live makes all the difference in how effective we can be in our ministry.

Mr. Bennett John Porchiran is the director of music ministries at St. Elizabeth Parish in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

**"Careful the things you say,
children will listen.
Careful the things you do,
children will see and learn.
Children may not obey,
but children will listen.
Children will look to you for which way
to turn, to learn what to be. . . ."**

Stephen Sondheim, "Children Will Listen"
from *Into the Woods*

First, Experience Good Liturgy

From young ages children should be exposed to and be part of good liturgy — especially good sung liturgy. The 1973 *Directory for Masses with Children* says: "Singing must be given great importance in all celebrations, but it is to be especially encouraged in every way for Masses celebrated with children . . ." (*Directory*, 30). Solid liturgical and musical planning for Sunday liturgies is primary. When the children go to Mass on Sunday with their families, it is important for them to experience worthy worship. Whether or not there is a school in addition to a non-academic faith formation program in a parish, there will be times when the children will be the primary members of a liturgical assembly. These should be planned as well as Sunday Mass, using the principles and suggestions in the *Directory for Masses with Children* and the ritual books and texts designed for such Masses. When possible, the parish music minister should be a part of the planning of these liturgies. Ample opportunities should be made for the children to participate in leadership roles in the liturgy, i.e., as lector, cantor, or part of a choral or instrumental music ensemble.

Liturgies with children, however, are frequently neglected by parish liturgists and pastoral musicians or done poorly. Often when it comes to music at children's liturgies or putting together children's ensembles for such celebrations, the task is left to a teacher's aid, who might have the right intentions but has little or no background in music, let alone any knowledge of liturgy. Many music

ministers will not even put time into choir programs for children or youth, nor will they offer apprentice cantor programs. Youth or contemporary choirs are frequently “pick-up ensembles” put together by someone who plays guitar and is looking for a venue to showcase personal skill. Such coordinators would often appreciate help, direction, and mentoring, but the parish musician either ignores their requests or just doesn’t have time to deal with them. How sad.

My guess is that most people in music ministry today were involved in music ministry when they were growing up. They were mentored; their music skills were nurtured; and their musical gifts were encouraged by the parish musician. I’m sure that one of the great draws to this ministry for them was the joy of experiencing, learning, preparing, and performing good music for Sunday and special celebrations. A good qualified pastoral musician can—and should—offer such experiences to young people today. Let’s look at some ways we can mentor students.

Children’s Choir and Cantor Programs

Children’s first experience of “full, active, and conscious participation” in the liturgy through music is often through participation in a children’s choir. So let us form children in sung worship by offering them the opportunity to sing at Mass. If you don’t have the skills for working with children, take the time to develop them. Get your own mentor. Find the best teacher and the best children’s choir director in your area and learn from them how to build a program that works. Find the most knowledgeable person in your area on developing the child’s singing voice and sit in on rehearsals or take a course from that person, if this expert teaches at a local university. Not only is it rewarding to learn these new skills but the children will also find a place and voice in the liturgy that they have not yet had. It also will provide an opportunity for you to do something that you couldn’t do before: mentor children and youth in good music and liturgy.

Here are some basic steps to take in mentoring children into music ministry.

1) Be open and receptive to all children who want to be in music ministry. Accept every child that comes to you to be a part of music ministry. Those who do not know how to sing will learn. Having tryouts is fine because they can help you place the children and get an idea of their vocal abilities, which in turn will help you with warm-up exercises so that you can target solutions for any problems. Tryouts are also an opportunity to meet parents and foster their support for the program. But tryouts should never be used to eliminate children from music ministry, only to place students.

2) Always do the best music you can with them. In his article “Rethinking the Role of Children in Choir and Music,” C. Michael Hawn suggests we “provide for children only the best music from all cultures where

the Christian faith is expressed. . . .”¹ When I started my first children’s choir, I was at a loss for repertory. It took hours of research to find good music for children, and composers didn’t focus much on children’s choirs. (Also, back then, there was no Internet.) But today, there is a lot of good repertory being written for children, and information is readily accessible online. Check out www.choristersguild.org for great musical resources and other material for use with children’s and youth ensembles.

3) Talk about the music. Teach young choristers and members of youth ensembles about the music they’re singing, about the musical structure. Make a game of analyzing the form, looking for repetitions, key changes, and all that good stuff that makes music exciting. Always remember to teach the children the hymns, ordinaries, and responses for each Mass. If they can handle it, allow them to add descants to the congregational parts.

4) Talk about the text. Help young people understand the words in an anthem or hymn. A lot of the vocabulary and imagery in hymns is a little sophisticated for some adults, let alone for children. Take the text apart and explore the images. Children can understand more theology than we give them credit for, but we have to teach them the meaning of the words. Children will always sing with enthusiasm, but it is amazing how the level of their enthusiasm is elevated when they understand what their sung prayer is all about.

My guess is that most people in music ministry today were involved in music ministry when they were growing up. They were mentored

5) Teach them about liturgy. We work hard to prepare liturgies, taking great care to be sure that our music suits the feast, the readings, the rites, and the liturgical season. Engage the children in conversation about how what they’re singing fits into this celebration. If their anthem is related to one of the readings, have one of the students read the Scripture for the choir. Help them to understand that, just like any other choir, they are there to help lead the assembly in worship through song. Children know the difference between praying and entertaining.

6) Build a team/community. As members of a choir, the children will learn to appreciate the joy of working creatively together. In a good choir, children will learn interdependence on each other in many ways, from showing up for rehearsals and liturgies to enjoying singing in harmony. They will learn, for example, that a descant is ineffective without the melody it embellishes and that the melody is greatly enhanced when a harmony or percussion is added.

7) Acknowledge and encourage the children. Be sure to make time in rehearsal to acknowledge, call on, or point out the good work of each child at least one time. Reward



Students at Sacred Heart Catholic School, East Grand Forks, Minnesota

punctuality and good work with small incentives.

8) Help them become leaders. Give the children a chance to be leaders in rehearsal as well as during the liturgy. This might include everything from handing out materials to directing the choir occasionally while you accompany—or let them accompany the choir if their skills will allow this. Give some of the older children the opportunity to do a solo or duet.

9) Start an apprentice cantor program. Offer children the chance to be cantors at liturgies with children. Once they have been in children's choir for a while, some of them will naturally gravitate toward the ministry of cantor. In my own program, I offer this opportunity to students in fifth grade and higher. We have two teachers in our school who are also cantors, so as a student grows in confidence and skill, he or she co-cantors with the teacher. Eventually, when the student feels comfortable and ready, he or she begins to serve as cantor without the teacher. But the students make this decision.

10) Take the time to reflect on their experiences. During the choir season, talk to the children about what they did in their last liturgy, about their effectiveness. Have them think about it and see if they could have done something better. If an anthem had a bad moment, talk about that, too. It helps them to realize the value of rehearsals. After the choir season, take the time to write each child a note about her or his value to the choir and try to include observations of how that child helped the assembly to pray. When you are working with a cantor or soloists, find the time shortly after their performance to talk with them about what was good or not good and to set goals to make things work better. It is very difficult to stand in front of an assembly of peers and do music ministry. Regardless of how well the cantor may have performed, there will always be peers who will chide the student. Give each cantor words of support and encouragement.

Good Example Yields Good Results

When children and youth are mentored in music ministry, many good things happen. As active participants in liturgy, they gain an appreciation for the joy that can be had in worship. They learn to pray more deeply and effectively. They learn what creativity is by being active, involved, and goal-oriented and by taking on a leadership role. They learn not to be merely spectators and passive, minimally-involved followers. They learn about the liturgy, the seasons, the names and functions of key moments, and liturgical rites. They apply the musical knowledge that they have been learning in music class or through instrument lessons. They come to appreciate the gathering of the community to pray.

Mentoring is a grave responsibility, especially when a mentor is working with youth and children. They are fertile ground for planting the seeds of learning, so as their mentors, we must be the best model of our ministry that we can be. We must be available and supportive, a teacher and a listener.

Jesus has often been called the Master Teacher. His relationship with his apostles is a wonderful model for being a teacher and mentor. We are most effective by our example. To be worthy mentors, we need to be good role models of the life of Jesus, of our ministry, and of the art of music. We witness to our faith by example, and we serve God's people through our gift of music.

Note

1. In John D. Witvliet, ed., *A Child Shall Lead: Children in Worship—A Sourcebook for Christian Educators* (Garland, Texas: Choristers Guild, 1999; distributed by Lorenz Corporation, Dayton, Ohio).

“First opportunities to mentor children”

reflection questions

Read the article “First Opportunities to Mentor Children” by Bennett John Porchiran from *Pastoral Music Magazine* (volume 32.3). Then, consider the questions below. Use them for individual self-reflection, or use them to guide group reflection with members of your choir, music ministry, liturgy committee, etc.

- 1. Bennett encourages us, “first, experience good liturgy.” What are you already doing well? How can you build upon what you’re currently doing to do even better?**

- 2. Re-read the ten basic steps for children’s programs. Which steps do you need to prioritize or address in your parish? Why did you identify these steps?**

- 3. When and how will you address these priorities? Who needs to be involved? What support, materials, or assistance will be needed?**

- 4. When it comes to a children’s choir, what is your parish’s “why”? Can you and your parish commit to supporting a children’s choir program? What needs to be put into place to be successful?**

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Children's Choir Basics excerpt

Ch. 1: Preparing the ground

The following text is an excerpt from Children's Choir Basics by David T. Nastal (Pastoral Press, 1999). For more information or to order, visit www.ocp.org.

Developing a children's choir program in a church community starts with a realistic look at available resources: your own enthusiasm and energy, the presence of enough children to make the idea viable, the support of parents, and the cooperation of the pastor, pastoral staff and other church leaders.

It begins with you. If you don't like children, stop here. A children's choir director must be genuinely interested in children and honestly enthusiastic about working with them. You will be spending a lot of time with them; they can spot a well-intentioned phony in a heartbeat. You will need patience, flexibility, physical energy, good musical skills, sturdy faith and a resilient spirit. You will teach, lead and communicate; in addition, at any given time, you will need the skills of a salesman, a public relations specialist or a politician. It comes with the territory.

If You're Not the Music Director

If you are not in charge of the overall parish music program, it is imperative that you have clear, direct communication with the music director. In the initial stages, it would be best to find a place where the two of you can talk for about an hour, uninterrupted by phone calls or other intrusions. A meeting away from the parish grounds can avoid "turf guarding." Share your ideas, dreams and philosophy; work out how a children's choir program will fit into the overall parish music ministry. Flexibility is needed, both for you and for the parish music director.

Develop mutual expectations and mutually beneficial exchanges of ideas. Never assume anything. You don't want to find out in December that the director is expecting a massive holiday production while your goal is simply to prepare the choir for a Christmas Eve liturgy. Be open to constructive criticism while pursuing excellence in musicianship and liturgy. Remember that you must have the support of the director, the pastor and other staff. Without that support, you may need to reevaluate your goals.

The Pastor

A crucial part of preparing the foundation is the initial meeting with the pastor, who is ultimately responsible for the parish. One pastor may be enthusiastic, another indifferent. This first meeting is to establish communication and to listen to the pastor's concerns. Share your philosophy about the importance of a children's choir program, of developing music ministry in the parish and of involving children in liturgy. Find out what the pastor's

expectations are. If they differ from yours, how will you negotiate resolution? Listen carefully to what is being said — and what is not being said. Diplomacy and tact are extremely useful in “selling” a program; it’s all part of the process. Keep the pastor fully informed at every stage of the development process.

Other key people to approach include the parish council, those responsible for religious education and those responsible for preparing liturgy; if the parish has a parochial school, talk to the principal and music teacher. Ask everyone for suggestions and advice. Listen attentively, take notes and gather information. Don’t come on too strong; that can intimidate without your knowing it. Good communication with potential resource persons can build a cooperative spirit and develop allies.

Overview of the Community

It is wise to research the community’s resources. A children’s choir program might not be viable in a church that serves a retirement community or senior citizen center. A general overview of the demographics of the community can give you an idea of resources and limitations. Some questions to ask are:

- What is the median age of the community?
- What are the economic strata?
- Are parents willing to support arts and cultural experiences for their children?

A parish school can be a rich source of information. Early in the process, make an effort to communicate with the school music teacher; it’s better to talk graciously than to trample on toes. It can take weeks, months, even years to heal damage done at this stage and regain trust.

Visit local elementary schools. If possible, arrange an interview with music teachers to discuss your plans for your program and to get advice and suggestions. One of your goals is to become known in the community as the children’s choir director: it’s free publicity for your program.

What are the general interests of the church and secular communities — sports, the arts, the military? The answers here can tell you how much groundwork will be necessary for a successful program. Obviously, the best of all possible worlds is a community with strong support of the arts; but educating the community to an understanding of artistic expression as a faith response is worthwhile and brings its own rewards.

Why a Children’s Choir?

Now it’s time to formulate a vision, a reason for having a children’s choir program in this community at this time. The purpose of a children’s choir is to develop children’s musicianship, integrate them into parish music ministry and allow them authentic involvement in the community’s prayer. This vision is always in the process of growth and change. Sort out the “whys” carefully so that you may present a clear vision. What are the pastoral needs for

a children's choir? Using children only for special occasions such as Christmas and Easter is trite, and exploits their contribution. Expand the vision. Transform participation into a regular liturgical rhythm, contributing at scheduled parish liturgies such as Sunday Mass, Evening Prayer or monthly religious education events. Avoid commitments that "use" the children instead of supporting their contribution to the total community experience. Children's choirs are not for the entertainment of doting adults.

Look to the future. What changes will occur in your community over the next twenty years? Is the area growing? Shrinking? Participants in the children's choir will be the adults involved in ministry in the future church. What would you like the prayer and music to become? How do you envision the music ministry of the future? How do you plan to improve the standards of music, liturgy and education in the future ownership of the church? This is your opportunity to make a difference in the future. Do not treat it lightly.

What will directing a children's choir demand of you in terms of music education and development of artistic expression? Some children (and some communities) are more reluctant than others to participate in the arts. Your sensitive approach can change this. Don't sell children short because of their community's resistance; artistic expression can bloom even in limited and arid soil. Young ideas need encouragement, tender care, food and water. As director, you can be the catalyst for developing artistic expression in children — and in their parents; a children's choir program provides an excellent forum for dialogue.

Identify where you will find support in the parish. Where do you foresee major or minor conflicts? Being an ostrich doesn't work. Distinguish between areas you can change and problems that are insurmountable. Advance scheduling is important. Carefully look over the public school calendar and parish calendar. When are the Scout programs? What days of the week are most tightly scheduled for sports in the public schools? Don't wear yourself out; budget your commitments of energy and time, choosing your battles wisely.

As you can see, in order to build a sturdy program with vision, a children's choir director has to work in circles more extensive than just music. Like planting and nurturing delicate spring shoots that will blossom in summer's heat, the care taken in preparing the ground for the children's choir program will blossom in the future.

Invitation message

Dear [parent/guardian name],

My name is [your name], the music director at [parish name]. I would like to share with you the idea of a new music ministry program and ask for [child's name] involvement. [referral name] identified [her/him] as someone who enjoys singing and who might be interested in participating.

[parish name] is planning to begin a children's choir program that would include children in [grade levels]. According to the parish records, [child's name] is eligible to become involved in this program. Enclosed is a brochure that explains the program and outlines the time commitments. I ask you to review this brochure and talk with [child's name] about this program.

During the week of [dates], parent volunteers will be calling you to help answer any questions you may have as well as to set up a conversation with you and your child. If you have immediate questions, please feel free to contact me at [phone number]. If you have recommendations of other children who might be interested in joining a choir, please let us know.

I look forward to hearing from you!

Sincerely,

[your name]
Music Director
[parish name]

Questions to consider as you begin inviting members:

Do I understand my target audience? Who are they? • What am I inviting them into? • What are the expectations I have of them (and their parents)? • What am I asking them (and their parents) to commit to? • Are there any points of flexibility or customization? • What supports are provided? • What can they (and their parents) expect from me? • How is this experience facilitated, led, and scheduled? • How will we communicate with one another?

Children's Choir Basics excerpt

Ch. 6: The rehearsal

The following text is an excerpt from *Children's Choir Basics* by David T. Nastal (Pastoral Press, 1999). For more information or to order, visit www.ocp.org.

SAMPLE REHEARSAL SCHEDULE

4:45 p.m.	Choristers arrive, collect music, follow check-in procedures, use the restroom.
5:00 p.m.	Rehearsal begins promptly, no matter how many singers are present. Use warm-ups with new anthem in mind. Include singing of familiar hymn.
5:09 p.m.	Five-question break (one minute, max)
5:10 p.m.	Sing familiar hymn, song or service music. Listen carefully and fix what needs fixing: diction, intonation and texts of specific verses.
5:15 p.m.	Work on new anthem in small sections. Reinforce warm-ups.
5:25 p.m.	Sing a familiar hymn tune or song, especially the second or third verse.
5:29 p.m.	Five-question break
5:30 p.m.	Work on second new anthem; introduce completely and work on small sections.
5:40 p.m.	Polish a third anthem for the next liturgical responsibility (Sunday liturgy or other event).
5:54 p.m.	Five-question break
5:55 p.m.	Announcements; public testing of choristers for achievement levels; closing prayer and dismissal procedures.
6:00 p.m.	Brief meeting with parents or choristers with extended questions. Close-up details with head choristers.

Warm-ups

Any good athlete knows that a warm-up reduces risk of injury and prepares the muscles for the task at hand. Children in a choir rehearsal need the same care and preparation. Sing warm-ups without excuses or exceptions. Keep the process engaging and entertaining for the children. If you are lucky enough to have one, a gifted chorister with strong music skills can demonstrate the warm-up exercises. Children will imitate a good sound, and a child's voice is easier for them to imitate than an adult voice. This kind of teaching can spark great interest and excitement, as well as gentle competition, among the children. It can also assist in developing head voice singing technique.

Staples

Every rehearsal should include the singing of hymns, songs, psalms and responses used at liturgy. These are the staples of the worshiping community and should become part of the regular music vocabulary for the children's choir. (During the first rehearsal, listen to and

evaluate the sound of the group during this common ground.) Avoid overkill: the children are not just assembly additions, but need other music to develop their identity as children's choir.

Teaching an Anthem

In your own preparation, you should have watched other conductors analyze and teach an anthem. Well before rehearsal, analyze the anthem you will be teaching during this rehearsal. Know where the repeated sections are and which phrases will be difficult. Draw warm-up exercises from the anthem, using sequential phrases as vocalises, e.g., "Gloria" from "Angels We Have Heard on High," ascending by half steps. When introducing a song to the choir, present it in its entirety, either by playing and singing it, or by playing a recording; it's easier to get where you're going if you know where you are headed.

A quality recording, which demonstrates the desired musicianship, is a good first step. Be selective about the use of recordings, however; some children's choirs produce tones that will not support your vision for the choir. Keep your standards high and avoid sloppy singing. Exposing choristers to the quality singing of the best choirs develops their "listening ears"; and their own quality will improve.

After the overview, break the anthem into teachable sections and phrases. From the beginning, teach the children how to read the musical language. Take small steps, be consistent, and help them learn to "read" the music. Are there repeated sections? Where are the difficult passages? Teaching by rote is the easy way out; it's like going to a fast food restaurant — quick, but not healthy in the long run. Teaching sight reading and musicianship is a longer route, but you will reap the rewards in later rehearsals. There are several different methodologies for teaching sight singing; some of these resources are noted in the appendix.

Rehearsal Tempo

Most children, second grade and up, can handle a 40- to 60- minute rehearsal with ease if you come prepared. Always keep rehearsal moving; this can be a do-or-die situation! Always have something up your sleeve to move forward if things get stuck, but keep the overall pattern consistent, so that the children know what to expect. Video games and technology have decreased children's attention span but improved their reaction time. It might be wise to pace your rehearsal in ten-minute segments with "five-question breaks." (See Sample Rehearsal Schedule, above and Five-Question Breaks, below.) Over time you are trying to increase the children's concentration and improve their focus on music making. Rap music and MTV make this an uphill battle, but use their methods

- brevity, liveliness, diversity, visual and aural presentation
- in your rehearsal. Make it an experience to which the children can relate.

Vary styles at all rehearsals to prevent boredom and increase the music vocabulary. Mix Mozart with Dufford, Gregorian chant with African folk songs, Latin with Spanish, Handel with Copland! Balance is the key to successfully focused diversity.

As well as varying styles, vary the accompaniments for the children's voices. Use a piano or organ for giving pitches or accompaniment, but do not be afraid to sing a cappella (unaccompanied). Singing without accompaniment allows children to hear their own voices and those of the other children. Rounds and canons are very effective; you may already have one or more possibilities in your repertoire. Look at the index of your hymnal or songbook (or accompaniment manual) for tunes that can be sung in canon. Singing a round is an enjoyable way for the choir to begin singing parts.

Woodwind instruments work extremely well with children's voices. Flutes can help with intonation problems more quickly and more easily than an electronic keyboard. Flute descants can also be used in working with two-part harmony training. Add a guitar for harmonic rhythms and you have a Renaissance ensemble in contemporary style.

If your community is fortunate enough to have handbells, use them with your children's choir. Don't be shy. The bells help provide rhythmic clarity and harmonic confidence. If Orff instruments are available (through the church school or nearby public school), use them; these instruments can add excitement to the program while developing the children's musicianship. Summer programs in Orff instruments can

benefit your choir program once you have gotten it off the ground. Rhythm instruments can also contribute to musicianship, but insist on a musical standard of playing the instruments, not just banging out rhythms. You are training musicians, not construction workers.

Don't limit your options. A child who studies a musical instrument may be able to play with the choir or even write out his or her own descant on melody. Keep children involved as active contributors and you will be amazed where this leads you — and your choir.

Five-Question Break

The five-question break is one way to organize a rehearsal. Children are always full of questions about anything and everything. Let them have the floor for five questions, preferably about music or what you've been working on — but in the long run, anything should be fair game. Holding their questions for these one-minute breaks helps children remain focused during rehearsal. It's advisable to plan five or six of these breaks per rehearsal.

Here are some examples of questions for the break: What are we wearing for the concert? What does this funny sign in the music mean? Why are you wearing the Bugs Bunny tie? Why is Sara wearing a special medal? What hymn book are we using Sunday?

Close the five-question break with one question from the director to reinforce a musical idea of the anthem being rehearsed: “On page 10, there’s a funny sign with an F in it. Does that mean fast? Or forte?” Remember to keep to the question-answer format; this engages the child’s thinking process. As the group matures in musicianship and concentration, these break periods may be diminished and replaced by information on bulletin boards and handout sheets. Avoid endless spoken announcements; children simply won’t remember them all. Being creative in the way you dispense vital information will limit the number of questions from both choristers and parents. Questions not answered in the five-question break can be dealt with at the end of rehearsal. As rehearsal ends, give the children a good feeling of musical accomplishment: another familiar song or anthem, or repetition of a section you worked on earlier. Dismiss the group the same way for every rehearsal. A brief prayer particularly suited for children is in order. You might have the group construct a prayer or use intercessory prayer. Develop specific, orderly routines for ending rehearsal and use them every time.

Children's Choir Basics excerpt

Ch. 12: Prayer life of the children's choir

The following text is an excerpt from Children's Choir Basics by David T. Nastal (Pastoral Press, 1999). For more information or to order, visit www.ocp.org.

The children's choir program is vitally connected to the prayer life of the worshipping community it is called to serve. This is the primary difference between the children's choir of a church and that of a secular community. You, as director, must develop the foundation of prayer in addition to knowing the skills and preparing the music.

Computers and video games have sharpened children's reaction time, but do nothing to develop the expression of feelings among a group. Help the children through this window of expression with music, giving them a tool to express emotions constructively and creatively. Rehearsal schedules may not permit extended periods of prayer; use the time you have to evoke a prayer response from the children, as individuals and as a group.

A parent may have a particular gift of prayer or be able to assist with prayer experiences. Talk about it in advance, to ensure that you and the parent have complementary views on prayer, faith and their articulation.

Encourage the children to write "a chorister's prayer" that might be used as an opening or closing prayer for each rehearsal. Help them to explore a variety of prayer styles: formal prayer (e.g., "Our Father," "Hail, Mary"), spontaneous intercessory prayer (asking God in their own words) or mantra prayer that might use a Taizé-style sung refrain. Your investment in the children's prayer life will have a powerful effect on your own. A child's simple prayer can bring wonderful focus to a stressed-out director. Every rehearsal should end with some form of prayer. Every liturgy or concert should begin with prayer; it is as necessary as a vocal warm-up.

During the year, a number of your choristers may be involved in sacramental preparation programs: first communion, first reconciliation, and Christian Initiation of Children Who Have Reached Catechetical Age (see RCIA), or the Anointing of the Sick. Their fellow choristers can become involved as individuals and as a group by praying for them at rehearsal and participating in the liturgies. When choir members choose prayer partners, the experience can bring significance to their prayer life, particularly for children preparing for sacramental celebration.

There may come a time when a child's family is experiencing a death, a military deployment, a life-threatening illness or other grave difficulty. The experience of music and prayer during rehearsal can be a great comfort to that child, as is the knowledge that others are praying for the family. In today's violent society, music and prayer can help children express feelings they may be called on to identify much too early in life: the death of other

children by shooting, the death of a teacher or fellow student. Music could diffuse or even prevent some violence and destruction. Sometimes the pastor or an associate might attend rehearsal and pray with the choir. Having a guest at rehearsal is a great motivator and, in the eyes of a child, the presence of the pastor is like a visit from the President.

In the process of helping prepare the children's prayer life, do not forget your own. Taking time in the quiet of your heart will make for focused rehearsals and well-prepared performances. Prayer is not a substitute for good rehearsals and musical preparation, but it is an integral part of them. Allow your prayer to become your song, and your song to become prayer. It is a powerful expression that affects both those who sing and those who listen.

Summary: End-of-the-Year Inventory

After the first choir season — September to May, or another schedule suitable for your community — give yourself a pat on the back. Congratulations! Take a deep breath and relax. Now you need to take inventory of what you and your choir have accomplished in this first season.

What music skills have the children developed, refined or re-defined? What did you learn from them? (Learning is a two-way street.) Can they now match pitch, sing a third and a fifth in tune? Can they read and sing a four-stanza hymn? Do they understand the musical road maps? Do they know where to go at the end of a verse or refrain, or when it says "D.C. al fine" ?

Do they sing the text with expression and appropriate dynamics? Are their minds engaged in music making? During rehearsal has their attention span lengthened and concentration improved? How have they fared in their first steps of sight singing? Do they pray well together in word and song?

If the answer is yes, give thanks and praise to God! You have taught the children, touching their hearts and minds. All of you have grown in the process, which will affect your lives for years to come, as well as future involvement in liturgical music ministry.

If the children have learned to interact positively with one another, then you have helped them on their journey of working within the community. If choir members have come to a sense of prayer, given examples of gospel values or sung psalms and hymns of praise from the heart, count yourself blessed for being an instrument. What a privilege to help them communicate with God and experience the love of Jesus and the prompting of the Holy Spirit!

How have the choristers affected the prayer life of the community they have been called to serve? Have they been integrated into the liturgical life of the church, giving support and not calling undue attention to themselves or their performance?

As director, how have you fared in keeping your life in balance with the demands of the children's choir program? Have your teaching methods grown to meet the needs of the choir? What new ways have you found to communicate with the children and their parents? Have you continued to practice diplomacy and tact amid rehearsals, liturgy, special projects and concerts?

Behind every child is at least one parent. Have you discovered more helpful ways to engage the talents of parents in support of the program or to expand it? Have parents taken a more active role in music ministry because of their contact with the children's choir program and your personal invitation?

Have church staff members gained a better insight into the importance of the children's choir program through the children's active role at worship and work within the community? Have staff members shared ideas and visions that might help the program? Everyone loves to give advice; listen gratefully and discern what may enhance next year's program. For instance, working together with the religious education program might help increase the children's involvement in the choir program — and vice versa!

These are just a few questions for you to reflect on as the first year comes to a close. Now, write down the three most successful events of this past year: ones that gave you energy or reinforced your vision with the excitement to move ahead. Capitalize on these successes; they will nourish your dreams and visions for the future of the program.

Then look at three events that failed. Be honest in analyzing why they did not work and who or what may have caused the failure. Be not the first to criticize nor the last to accept responsibility, but be open and honest with yourself. A staff member you trust may be able to help with this process.

Look to the future, setting goals for next year in the light of what has happened this year. You may need to adjust your compass for the next few weeks, or refocus some three-year goals. A change in course can help alleviate stress; it can provide a more successful educational experience and a deeper ministerial response than grimly struggling to meet the original goals. Stay rooted in the moment; keep your mind open, alert to opportunities that can help the children's choir ministry. It may be time to take a conducting course or attend a summer music course at a nearby university. You might gather together three or four children's choir directors to brainstorm some ideas, writing them on index cards and keeping them handy for planning future choir activities.

A ship goes nowhere without a captain to set its course. Through thoughtful evaluation of the past year, set your course for the year ahead. Success is yours if you keep your goals clear as you journey with Jesus at your side.

Rehearsal culture checklist

The checklist below is meant to help identify areas for improvement. After answering “yes” or “no” for each question, identify realistic action steps that could be taken to improve the effectiveness of your rehearsals. For best effect, provide this checklist several members of the choir or music ministry. Then, hold a conversation to align responses and action steps.

FOR THE YEAR/SEASON

	yes	no	action items
1. A consistent rehearsal day, time, and place has been established and communicated.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
2. Members know their schedule of liturgies for the next six months.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
3. Members have reviewed “choir member expectations” in the past six months.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
4. Members have reviewed rehearsal procedures in the past year.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
5. Contact information for all members has been updated in the past year.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
6. Seating plans were updated and communicated in the last four months.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
7. A process exists for distributing, collecting, and filing/managing scores, hymnals, etc.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
8. New/prospective members are regularly invited to attend rehearsals.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	

FOR EACH REHEARSAL

	yes	no	to-do list
9. All singer/instrumentalist folders are prepared ahead of time.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
10. All musicians receive the rehearsal agenda/line-up ahead of time.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
11. Basic rehearsal necessities are available (i.e. pencils, water, post-it notes, etc.).	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
12. The agenda/line-up is posted for all to see during the rehearsal.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
13. Rehearsals begin exactly on time.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	

14. Every rehearsal includes warm-up exercises.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
15. Every rehearsal includes prayer.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
16. Rehearsals regularly include some sort of liturgical or ministerial formation.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
17. Choir members understand the target(s) or goal(s) for each rehearsal.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
18. Rehearsals are generally upbeat, positive, and constructive.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
19. Rehearsals end exactly on time.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	

FOR EACH LITURGY

	yes	no	action items
20. Rehearsals are evaluated.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
21. The music space is set-up before musicians arrive for liturgy.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
22. Pre-liturgy rehearsal is not a distraction to the assembly.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
23. Pre-liturgy rehearsal includes warm-up and prayer.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
24. Pre-liturgy rehearsals begin exactly on time.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
25. Time for silence and prayer is given between rehearsal and the liturgy.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	

In addition, what other questions, observations, or concerns need to be addressed?

How will the action steps identified above be implemented? When? By whom?

When will this checklist be revisited for re-evaluation?

Rehearsal agenda builder

REHEARSAL DATE: _____

NEXT LITURGY: _____

CLOCK	TIME	ACTIVITY	GOAL or FOCUS	NOTES
WHAT WENT WELL:			FOR NEXT TIME:	

Rehearsal agenda example

REHEARSAL DATE: Monday, October 9

NEXT LITURGY: 28th Sunday in OT (October 15)

CLOCK	TIME	ACTIVITY	GOAL or FOCUS	NOTES
7:00	10	Warm-ups	Focus on breath, articulation, and interval warm-ups.	
7:10	10	Letatio Divina and prayer	Pray with the Gospel reading for the upcoming Sunday. Use prayer cards with choir prayer.	
7:20	8	"Hallelujah Chorus" (Handel)	Sections D and E: Clean-up consonant placement and rhythms	Use on Christmas Eve and Day
7:28	6	"A Christmas Gloria" (Gibson)	Verses only: phrasing and breath placement, dynamics (mark scores!)	Use all Christmas Season
7:34	12	"Lord of All Hopefulness" (Eicker)	First sing-through of entire piece, focus on roadmap, score marking, and verse + descant	Use on Sunday, November 5
7:46	5	"As We Gather At Your Table" (NETTLETON)	Review introduction and transitions, soprano descant.	Next Sunday
7:51	4	Psalm 23: I Shall Live in the House of the Lord (Alstott)	Refrain only: teach refrain to choir. If time, run a verse with Steve (cantor).	Next Sunday
7:55	5	Announcements	Review upcoming liturgy and rehearsal schedule, remind about cantor training on Tuesday.	
8:00	0	Dismissal		
WHAT WENT WELL: We covered all our goals. This was the most consistent we have been on the "Gloria." The new piece was well-received.			FOR NEXT TIME: Review parts for current Mass acclamations. Spend more time on breathing exercises during warm-ups. Spend time on score-marking; some singers are inconsistent.	

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