



Worship Formation & Liturgical Resources: Frequently Asked Questions

What is the role of the choir in worship?

The worship staff receives a number of similar inquiries on worship-related topics from across the church.

These responses should not be considered the final word on the topic, but useful guides that are to be considered in respect to local context with pastoral sensitivity.

The response herein may be reproduced for congregational use as long as the web address is cited on each copy.

What is the role of the choir in worship? Put simply, a choir's role is to lead the assembly's song. This sounds simple enough, but what does this look and sound like?

Cantor and Choir

The tradition of a choir leading worship is an ancient one that has been renewed and reformed over the centuries. The Old Testament refers to choirs of men and boys. Choirs in the early Christian church were modeled on choirs that led synagogue worship. With the advent of more complex, multi-layered music, choirs began to dominate worship music, leaving the assembly to simply listen. Martin Luther valued the choir, but encouraged such groups to lead the assembly's song rather than dominate it. Even today, choirs and other singing ensembles need to be aware of their presence in worship, being careful to lead rather than usurping the assembly's singing.

Who sings in a choir?

Men and women, young and old, professional musicians and amateurs who love to sing all can find a place in the choir. Some congregations have one choir for all ages; others have a graded choir program for children and one or more singing groups for adults. In some congregations, paid professional singers serve as section leaders and volunteers comprise the remainder of the choir, while in most other congregations, all members volunteer their time.

"But I can't sing." Many people will say they cannot sing, but in most cases, this is not true. Many may not know how to read music, but still enjoy singing. Some choir directors welcome those who learn by ear rather than reading music notation. In the rare situation that a person is tone-deaf or for some other reason cannot contribute to the choir in a beneficial way, the leader will want to steer that person into other areas of worship leadership.

What does the choir sing?

A choir sings what the assembly sings and more. A choir has a vital role in hymn singing. They can help teach a new hymn, sing stanzas alone or provide harmony/descants on

selected stanzas. (see also, [“How do we introduce new music to our congregation?”](#)) In addition to leading the hymns, songs, and service music, a choir will often lead the psalm (see also, [“Why do we sing the Psalms?”](#)). The choir also sings music that is too technically challenging for the assembly. Choir anthems from many eras and styles can enrich worship and are often sung during the offering, communion or at other times.

When and Where?

In some congregations, a choir sings every Sunday throughout the year, including the summer. Others sing during the school year only. In addition to Sunday worship, choirs are often vital worship leaders during the Christmas Season, Holy Week and for other festival services. Children’s choirs tend to sing less frequently, but it is wise to consider how to involve children in music even at times when the children’s choir is not leading worship (see also, [“How do we involve children and youth in worship?”](#))

If a congregation has multiple services and one choir/ensemble, the choir or ensemble can regularly sing at the same service or alternate between services so that the different worshipping assemblies benefit from the choir’s leadership. Some congregations have choirs or ensembles designated for each service. On some occasions such as festival Sundays, choirs may combine.

Because of the hectic pace of our lives, some congregations offer a festival choir that enables singers who cannot make a long-term commitment to rehearse for five or six weeks, preparing for a festival service or season.

It is helpful to consider from where the choir sings. Of course, the worship space will influence this decision significantly. Does the choir sing from a choir loft in front or from a balcony? Does the choir vest and sing as a group or do they rehearse together and then sing from different places among the assembly. (see also, [“What are vestments and paraments and Why are they used?”](#))

Each arrangement has its benefits and liabilities. It will be helpful for the choir/ensemble director to notice how the space serves or hinders the choir’s leadership and make adjustments as needed.

Rehearsing the Choir

A team does not play a game without spending weeks in practice and preparation. Likewise, in order to lead with skill and confidence, choirs need to rehearse. Substantial time given to rehearsing the hymns, songs and other service music makes for a confident choir and a confident assembly. Rehearsing is about more than learning the right notes and rhythms. Choirs and other musical groups will spend time with the details, making a piece come alive in ways that communicate the music’s mood and style.

Rehearsal is also a time for musical worship leaders to be nourished as a Christian community within the larger congregation. Devotions and prayer remind choirs of their calling to sing their faith and by their leadership, shape the faith of the assembly.

RESOURCES

Frequently Asked Questions:

- 🔗 How do we introduce new music to our congregation?
- 🔗 Why do we sing the Psalms?
- 🔗 How do we involve children and youth in worship?
- 🔗 What are vestments and paraments and Why are they used?
- 🔗 What is the role of music in the Lutheran liturgy?

Resources Available from Augsburg Fortress:

- 📖 *Musician's Guide to Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2007. This resource offers guides on leading assembly song and assistance in leading each hymn, song and piece of liturgical and service music in Evangelical Lutheran Worship.
- 📖 *Soli Deo Gloria: Choir Devotions for Years A, B and C*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress.
- 📖 *Sundays and Seasons*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress. Print version published annually by church year.
 - 📖 Also available as an online subscription at www.sundaysandseasons.com.
- 📖 Burke, Suzanne and Martin Seltz, eds., *Worship Matters: An Introduction to Worship*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2012. (Leader edition and Participant edition also available separately).
- 📖 Buckley Farlee, Robert. *Musicians in the Assembly*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001.
- 📖 Westermeyer, Paul. *The Church Musician, Revised Edition*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997.
- 📖 Wold, Wayne L. *Preaching to the Choir: The Care and Nurture of the Church Choir*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003.

Other Resources

- 📖 Bell, John. [*The Singing Thing: A Case for Congregational Song*](#). Chicago: GIA Publications, Inc. 2000.
- 📖 Bell, John. [*The Singing Thing, Too: Enabling Congregations to Sing*](#). Chicago: GIA Publications, Inc. 2007.
- 📖 Bertalot, John. [*John Bertalot's Immediately Practical Tips for Choral Directors*](#). Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1994.
- 📖 Parker, Alice. [*Melodious Accord*](#). Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1991. (Limited availability and available only as used product)
- 📖 Wilson-Dickson, Andrew. [*The Story of Christian Music*](#). Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1996.

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