



REBUILD & RENEW

A 12-STEP PROGRAM
TO FIRE UP YOUR CHOIR

by Patti Drennan

JMC1192 Also available
Supplemental Vocalises (Reproducible)

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Foreword

It almost felt as if the musical world came to a screeching halt in March 2020. Unsure of the effects that the deadly Coronavirus could bring, most churches and businesses shuttered their doors until medical officials could analyze the seriousness and duration of this pandemic. Further studies showed that singers and instrumentalists had the potential to project virus-laced droplets that could travel farther than a safe distance of six feet. For many months, choirs quit singing in worship and large performances. Then later, members began wearing singers' masks as they sang. They also performed in much smaller groups. Since the median age of choir members often ranges above age sixty, and since there were no vaccinations then available, many singers stayed in the safety of their homes. This was especially true if they were immuno-compromised. In a fairly short time, creative technology began to be devised to allow for online worship, that included adding music. It was a testimony that music cannot be silenced! Martin Luther said so eloquently,

“Music is the art of the prophets, the only art that can calm the agitations of the soul; it is one of the most magnificent and delightful presents God has given us.”

Even as choirs have slowly returned to their vital role in worship, many singers are hesitant to resume singing for numerous reasons. Health, aging voices and the convenience of online worship are some explanations for their absence. In addition, there are singers within the congregation who may have the gifts to offer in worship but jobs, children's schedules or other duties take higher priority than choir membership.

It's time to rebuild and renew!

With the writing of this book, I hope to offer affirmation and hope, as well as practical tools from which directors can select to use in their rehearsals and worship services. Whether it is working to bring back singers to the choral “fold” or whether it is acquiring new members, it is part of our ministry work to find new ways to enliven music and the arts in our churches, schools, and communities. Let music live!

- Patti Drennan

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1. The Choir as Leaders in Worship

Choirs have been an integral part of worship since 2nd century AD in ancient Greece. The genre has vastly evolved from Greek drama, Gregorian chant, organum, motets and masses. Eventually, the creation and use of many different instruments has opened new possibilities for choral music. As we fast forward to the twenty-first century, we rejoice that choirs continue to be a staple in providing such worship resources as liturgy, special music, anthems and choral benedictions. The choir's purpose is not to "perform" but to lead the congregation in drawing closer to God through worship, and thereby to draw the singers themselves to a deeper relationship with the Holy Spirit. The singers' role is to use their gifts to strengthen and undergird the corporate ministry. As they desire to give thanks to God, not only with their voices, but also with the manner in which they live, the choir becomes a compelling means of encouraging Spirit-filled worship of God.

In worship, the choir can add many components:

- By adding harmonies that help demonstrate the beauty of God
- By being engaged with the words that are sung
- By singing as an act of worship in response to God's overflowing Grace
- By encouraging the congregation to also lift their voices in praise
- By creating musical moments, allowing for quiet meditation and prayer
- By making opportunities for musicians to share their faith through music
- By bringing involvement and energy into the service
- By being an extension of the small group ministry, providing discipleship and fellowship
- By teaching the congregation new music to sing
- By giving more people an opportunity to serve than is possible with a limited number of musicians in a praise team
- By serving as an outreach tool either for the community or on mission trips further away from the community

2. Rebuild, Recruit, and “Youth-anize!”

Before you look at this chapter and are concerned that rebuilding a choir means to eliminate the older singer by extraordinary means, I will assure you, that is not the message being sent (!). If that were the case, many choirs in this nation would be totally eliminated, as the median age of so many of today’s adult choirs is 65 years and above, as previously noted. (For participation in the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, applicants must be between 25 and 55 years of age. Tenure in the choir is 20 years or until age 60, whichever comes first. Imagine the luxury of having that many interested singers, knowing the organization has constructed an age-limit rule that will cap how long you may serve.)

Many reasons can be attributed to having an older choir. Senior singers often have more time to participate, as their children (if they have them) are now grown. They have been a part of a choir for many decades and appreciate the camaraderie with fellow musicians. In some cases, they have lost a spouse and look forward to being with others as they share their gifts in worship. Though younger singers can definitely be found in many choirs, we too often find fewer young adult singers available because of their children’s activities, combined with their own work schedules. What does a director do to bolster the numbers? Here are a “dynamic dozen” ideas:

1. Look to your own members within the congregation, high school and above. Have a contest to see how many prospective members each singer can invite and hand out a reward. Involve an opportunity for food and fellowship as well. Oftentimes, a parent would enjoy a night away from the children, and singing can provide this opportunity. Most churches have childcare available on nights of rehearsal and if not, consider pooling money to pay for a sitter so the parent(s) can sing. In all ways in which you communicate, make sure that you do not sound desperate for more singers as this can undermine the feelings of those already in the choir.
2. Ask your singers to personally invite a friend from the church or an outsider who might not have a church affiliation.
3. Celebrate the women of the church on Mother’s Day by asking all men to join for a couple of rehearsals to learn a song to be sung celebrating the women. Do the same on Father’s Day and invite the women. Often times, those who sing just need an added push to “check out” a rehearsal. Hopefully they will enjoy their experience and come back as a regular member.

3. The Children's Choir: A Lifeline to Our Future

When I lead music reading sessions for publishers across the nation, I always make it a point to ask about the churches where the attendees serve. I frequently ask whether they worship traditionally with choir and organ, in a contemporary or blended setting, then I ask about their children's and student choirs. There is usually some head shaking and many respond that their church doesn't have an active children's choir ministry. An occasional song is sung in Sunday school classes, but nothing where they had an extended time of singing. How sad this is for the future of our youth and adult choirs. How can we be assured that choral music can continue to thrive without building and rebuilding our basic foundation, starting with the children? By connecting closely with the children's minister and working together to create opportunities of singing together, playing instruments, allowing young piano students to provide music for offertory, working together for a special musical that is fun and engaging, and so many other ways, we can ensure a future of music in worship. Children are fascinated with performing and acting, and when given the chance to role-play, they flourish. So many children's musicals are available for rental. Not only are they enjoyable to sing, but the spiritual message and scripture reading make it a win-win situation. In addition, when a child is in a production at church, the siblings, parents, grandparents and friends all attend. This pack-the-pew moment is perfect for promotion of the church and its ministries. Now with live streaming available, a wider audience can be reached as well.

What are some reasons we should encourage our staff to promote children's music in an already packed church schedule?

1. Singing in a choir can teach them to serve others with their musical gifts.
2. Choirs can teach children songs to help learn scripture, just as the "ABC" song helped us learn our alphabet.
3. Choirs can introduce the children to music and lyrics they might not already know.
4. Good theology can be taught through singing quality music.
5. Being in a choir helps develop social skills and moves the children and youth away from a culture of only listening to music rather than singing music.
6. Singing can help mental health and well-being. While singing, oxytocin and endorphins are released by the brain and reduce anxiety levels.