

# **Back to Basics: Refreshing and Improving the Experience for Your Church Choir**

**By Dr. Matthew Culloton**

**Choirmaster, House of Hope Presbyterian Church, St. Paul  
Founding Artistic Director, The Singers, Minneapolis**

## **I.**

Simple does it! By refreshing musical and non-musical elements in your choral program, you will enhance and improve the experience and renew the excitement of your choir members. Refreshing and improving the experience for your church choir will likely have the following benefits:

- Improved singing;
- More meaningful personal relationships between you and the choir, as well as a closer-knit choir community;
- A more positive work and music environment;
- New members;
- Enhanced worship community.

*Who can argue with this wonderful list?!*

### **\* The Importance of Self-Assessment for the Church Choir Conductor**

- Musical Matters
- Administrative and Non-Musical Matters (Who are your worker bees?)
- ***High standards are refreshing!***

### **\* The Melding of Tradition and Vision (a.k.a. The Past and the Future)**

- Conductor's ownership
- Choir members' ownership
- Annual Goal Setting in the Choir Rehearsal (Musical and Non-Musical)

## **II. Musical Matters for Your Consideration**

### **\* Musical Programming**

In the church setting, as in all settings, our ensemble is defined by the music it sings.

- Are you adding new titles each year? (Not just new music releases, by the way)
- Do you know your programming breakdown? Analyze this to learn the truth.
- Investigate new sources to find titles and scores: CPDL.org, Choralnet.org, Reading sessions, etc.
- Reminder: Tradition vs. Vision
- Guest conductors/clinicians can be refreshing (leave your ego at the door)
- Do you do "larger" works throughout the year? Consider these as musical pillars.
- Is there a Sunday dedicated to the music program? This may be a meaningful addition to the calendar!

*Know your choir's limits – strengths and weaknesses – but don't underestimate the potential.*

## \* The Vocal Warm-Up

Timothy Seeling: For morning rehearsals we warm up the voices. For evening rehearsals, we warm the voices down, not up. Think about activation (a.m.) and finesse (p.m.).

*Refresh:* 1. Plan five exercises that can ideally be related to the music being sung that day.  
2. Write out your plan before rehearsal. You are less likely to “wing it” this way.

### Recommended warm-up sources:

Jennings, Kenneth. *Sing Legato*. Kjos Music.

Nesheim, Paul. *Building Beautiful Voices*. Roger Dean Publishing. (Singers books available)

Selig, Timothy. *The Perfect Blend*. Shawnee Press.

## \* Choir Formation – Messing with Nature’s Natural Selection

- How do you seat your choir (on macro and micro levels)?
- Remember: You have the power to change what isn’t working

*Refresh:* 1. Re-seat the choir to mix things up.... even if its just for rehearsal.  
2. Have each singer’s name on a note card, and “assign” the seats before they even enter the room.

## III. Administrative and Non-Musical Matters

### \* Rehearsal Planning

*Assess:* How do you plan your rehearsals? How do you share your plan?  
How often does your planning change as rehearsal goes by?

*Refresh:* 1. Write out your rehearsal goals and assign a specific amount of time for each piece on the rehearsal.  
2. Write this schedule on a chalkboard/whiteboard and let your choir see your plan. *Note how the engagement from the choir may change.*

### \* Attendance Planning and Tracking

*Assess:* Are you frustrated by spotty attendance habits? Are choir members frustrated by the attendance habits of their colleagues? Would your planning benefit by knowing upcoming absences?

*Refresh:* 1. Create a Conflict Calendar and ask (and ask, and ask) that choir members sign-out for absences in advance.  
2. Take attendance on Sunday mornings and Rehearsal evenings. Start to pick up trends, and use that information to speak or send a note to perpetrators.

*Being a volunteer is a commitment to participate fully. Being a volunteer is not an excuse for shoddy and inconsistent participation. High standards are refreshing!*

## \* **The Social Network: Does your choir know each other?**

How can we create a healthy and strong community in our choral community?

- Start the year with introductions and/or name tags
- Survey the choir (almost anything goes) and share info confidentially
- Choir Retreats: Everyone loves a pot-luck! ... but sing something while you're at it.
- E-mail communications

## \* **Recruitment Efforts... and a word of caution**

A very common goal exists in this profession: increase the size of the choir. New members can refresh the experience for others.

Assess:           What is the size of the choir now? Where would you like to see growth?  
                      Where can you anticipate a (near) future need for new members?

Consider:        1. Choir members may know church members who may be potential choir members. Gather names and info.  
                      2. Truth: Some former members are better “former” than “current.”  
                      3. Use the younger choir members to cultivate ideas. Why did they join? Do they have friends who may be interested?  
                      4. Use technology to create a choir video for the website. If you don't know how to do this, someone in the choir likely does. A 5-minute video could be a powerful method of recruitment.  
                      5. Consider having two weeks each year (one week at a time) to welcome new members “commitment free.”

## \* **Other refreshers – abridged:**

1. When was the last time the choir heard their efforts? Can you record (audio or video) and share with the choir members. This builds morale (usually) and excites members.
2. Challenge yourself to stand by the door and thank singers for their efforts as they leave rehearsal. No matter how tough the rehearsal may have been, no one leaves grumpy if the last thing they heard was “thank you.”
3. Not all music in the folder needs to be sung in a service. Perhaps a score exists in the folder to use as a teaching tool, “carrot-on-a-stick,” or a future possibility.
4. If means exist, consider commissioning a new work for your choir. You have the ability to work with a composer and set the musical parameters. Commissioning music is a great way to commemorate, honor, or memorialize.