

Church choirs: Cultivated excellence or "everybody welcome!"?

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Holy Week and Easter are matched only by Advent and Christmas as prime times of the Christian year for showcasing choral singing. This has me thinking about church choirs generally—what are they for and who should sing in them? Maybe not burning questions in light of more recent theological controversies (is there a [hell](#) and is anybody in it?), but questions I'd like a little more clarity on. And since I blog so that I might know better what I think about this or that subject, here goes.

What are church choirs for? There's a long history of liturgical choral singing in Judaism and Christianity that can't be rehearsed here, so let me cut to the chase: Since most Protestant churches don't sing or chant much, if any, of the liturgy, what's the role of the choir in today's worship? (And, by the way, after 20+ years of a Psalter in the back of the hymnal, why don't United Methodists *sing* the Psalms? I don't mean the "musical responses" but the actual Psalms themselves. That's what those little red dots over some of the words are for, along with the instructions and tune (tone) options on page 737. In worshiping in lots of UM congregations through the years—large and small, urban and rural, high- and low-church, I've rarely experienced it, though I did try to teach it once to a small group of church leaders. They were game; the results were mixed. But I digress).

Church choirs often seem to be performers rather than, say, partners in worship. (Modern church architecture with centrally-placed choir "lofts" only aids this impression). That is, from on high the choir sings a "special" (a favorite word of many small congregations—and maybe peculiar to the South, I don't know), sometimes even eliciting applause from the audience, er, congregation. The idea that the choir

might have a subtler, richer role to play doesn't seem to have much purchase.

Who should sing in a church choir? There seems to be at least two lines of thought on this. The first is that choirs should be open to any and all who want to "make a joyful noise unto the Lord." No experience necessary. Can't read music? No problem. Do your best singing in the shower? We want you. For some choir directors who subscribe to this way of thinking there's a deliberate effort to help bring the inexperienced up to speed: choosing very simple music, teaching basic sight-reading skills, etc. For others, the rationale seems to be that the uninitiated will catch on over time. If they want/love to sing—even if they sing badly—who are we to keep them out of the choir? We don't have to be perfect or even all that good, we just have to do our best. And we're not elitists—we welcome everybody.

The other line of thought assumes that church choirs should be comprised only (or at least overwhelmingly) of people with the ability to sing well. While the "Everybody Welcome!" approach to choral singing is necessarily well-known in the whole congregation—as a recruiting strategy if nothing else—the "cultivated excellence" approach does not broadcast its preference that only the musically-gifted need apply. So it's tricky. Church choir directors who subscribe to this approach do not want to appear elitist; they don't want to offend or hurt people's feelings. But they really do think that excellence matters. "Would we want a pastor with no formal training?" they reason. "A preacher with no recognizable gifts for oratory?" Of course not.

It's probably true statistically that these approaches line up along the small church/large church divide: small congregations generally don't have the resources (human or monetary) to pursue and sustain choral excellence while large churches often do. But that's not always true. I've worshiped in large congregations with mediocre musicianship and I've experienced small churches who've managed to maintain a strong choir on a shoestring (or no string) budget.

And I don't think there's a one-size-fits-all answer to these questions. Congregational life is relentlessly local, particular to a

place and its history, necessarily ad hoc in the working out of its common life. Sometimes the “Everybody Welcome!” choirs need to work much harder to be better at what they do—to combat the laziness and resignation that easily creeps in over time.

And sometimes the really good church choirs need to lighten up a little. Is there anything worse than a high-church music snob? As someone prone to this condition I think not.

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