Our last three articles have offered suggestions for starting, building, and maintaining a children’s church choir program. Feeling overwhelmed by the task before you? Take a deep breath, read the following summary of suggestions, then choose two new things to try in each of the upcoming school semesters. Give yourself time to make each application your own. Keep growing and learning as a director, and most of all, enjoy your time with your young choristers.

- Get to know your potential singers through Sunday School, Vacation Bible School, and greeting families at church.
- Gather support from the clergy, music, and activities staff for the children’s choir program. Work within the overall church programming and scheduling. Be a positive advocate for a children’s music ministry.
- Calendar ~ plan well. Check local school schedules as well as the overall church activity and worship calendars before setting singing dates. Create a full year’s schedule for each choir. Publish choir schedules through the mail, through emails, and on your church’s website.
- Communicate effectively with your choir parents. Gather important information (registration form), create email groups, send email reminders, stay positive, be supportive.
- Make an attendance chart/roll book and keep it up to date. Follow up on absences via email to parents and/or postcards to children.
- Encourage good attendance and punctuality. Devise a recognition program for your choirs.
- Devise an effective system to file music/anthem ideas for children’s music.
- As you plan, keep an eye on the small details as well as the big picture. Each rehearsal should be well thought out, each year should have an overall plan (possibly a theme), and you should have an idea of where you want the singers and the program to be in a few years.
- Plan your rehearsals and write a lesson plan* (sample lesson plan is included below). Be sure to include gathering songs/activities, vocal and rhythmic warm-ups, hymn singing, movement (body percussion), intense work on several anthems, prayer, and a goodbye song. Respect the time your choristers and their families give to each rehearsal and provide a well-planned experience.
- Teach hymns: make a list of 7 – 9 hymns that your choristers will learn and sing in worship. Be sure to include descants and instrumental accompaniments on several of the hymns. Include two communion hymns that can be used repeatedly.
- Teach liturgical music. Encourage your choristers to be worship leaders and sing enthusiastically, even when sitting in the pews with their families.
- Collect interesting visual aids to teach singing and musical concepts: 1” x 36” ribbon, scarf, puppets, Hoberman sphere, slinky. Use to teach phrasing, diction, breathing…the possibilities are endless.
- Always be on the lookout for good repertoire. Ask other children’s choir directors the titles of their ten favorite anthems. Attend reading sessions. Sing a favorite SATB anthem in unison. Sing in other languages and include music from all periods. Include global music.
- Attend conferences to get new teaching ideas. Consider getting certification in Kodaly, Orff or Choristers Guild Institute. NEVER stop observing and learning.
- Collect interesting vocal warm-ups and singing games for children. Create your own from within current repertoire. Practice part-singing with a few traditional non-religious songs. Use warm-ups to increase focus, correct problems, improve pitch and vocal production, and above all, have fun.
- Evaluate your own vocal production and diction. Are you a good role model? Take a series of voice lessons and watch other directors to improve your vocal model for your choristers.
- Only a few choristers? Work with what you have and make them feel and sound successful. Establish identity within the church. Provide meaningful involvement in worship and church-wide events for your choir. Membership will increase over time. Get to know the families with nursery-aged and primary children. Grow your choir.
- Learn and present a musical. Children’s hidden talents and enthusiasm often bubble to the surface while presenting a musical. If performing a full 45 minute musical is too daunting a task, start with two or three story anthems, string them together, and add action.
- Feed your choirs occasionally: snacks, earned treats, or with a birthday celebration. Have a choir picnic with families after church one Sunday. Encourage community. Food helps bring people together.
- Involve choir parents. Find effective ways for all parents to volunteer at some point throughout the year.
- Keep choirs visible in the church’s life. Create an attractive bulletin board with photos of choristers in rehearsal and in choir robes posted where all members can see it. Write about the choir experience for the church newsletter. Have an attractive, separate page for the children’s choir on the church website.
• Think of ways to significantly begin and end the choir year: a kick-off rehearsal that includes arts & crafts, a longer first rehearsal followed by a family dinner, an end-of-year party, rewards for good attendance, choir certificates for all.
• Stay rested and refreshed so that you bring a positive attitude to rehearsals and worship.

ONE LAST SUGGESTION…

REHEARSAL PLAN: How do you keep track of each rehearsal’s progress? Do you write down lesson plans? Do you use a standard rehearsal plan form to record what needs to be covered in your precious, limited rehearsal time or just put your music in order and “wing it”? Have you had to skip an activity because you forgot to pre-set a chart or teaching tool? We all have the best intentions for preparation, but often we fall short of bringing our best to rehearsals.

We “pick up where we left off”, rehearse an anthem straight through instead of concentrating on difficult passages, or keep doing the same warm-ups or singing games week after week because we do not take time to find or create useful warm-ups or search for different games. If you have a series of rehearsals in a row on the same day, how can you truly keep track of what occurred in each? To stay focused in and out of rehearsals, create a rehearsal-plan form, one that works for you…and use it.

To create the form, make a list of what you do in rehearsal and the order you follow. To the side of each song or activity, write down what items you need for each activity: a word chart, a teaching tool, an instrument, etc. Now, prepare a blank form with choir name, a place for the date, attendance numbers, and a column with the type and order of each activity. Create a second column alongside the first so you can list teaching aids, etc., that you need for each. Did you include a gathering activity, warm-ups for voice and body, time to work on sections of 2–3 anthems, hymnal time, a prayer, and a goodbye song? Use one for each choir, each week. If prepared (in your mind, on paper, and in your choir room) you should be able to set up quickly (even give your list to an assistant!) and move smoothly from one activity to the next, covering everything in the allotted time.

You can also make a simple chart for each rehearsal to display, then invite a child to “check off” or erase each activity as it’s completed. Your choristers will have a greater sense of accomplishment when rehearsal is over and they may be more focused knowing that they can be chosen as your helper to “check off” or erase completed activities.

When rehearsals are over, glance over your rehearsal plan. Check off accomplishments, make notes, and, if you had a moment of genius during rehearsal, write it down for next week. You’ll be surprised how much material can be covered in a well-planned rehearsal. Give this planning process a try. Your rehearsals will be much more productive and you will be more relaxed. Also, when emailing parents about everything happening in choir, you will have a ready-made list that will impress them!

Below is lesson plan for my Primary Choir from earlier this semester. Tweak this to make it fit your situation.

Sample Lesson Plan for a Children’s Church Choir

4:35 – 5:10 p.m.

PRIMARY CHOIR

1st & 2nd graders

September 14, 2011

25

# in attendance
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Aids/Props/Instruments</th>
<th>minutes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>GATHERING</strong></td>
<td><em>The Color Game</em> (&quot;I’m thinking of a color&quot;)&lt;br&gt;(check pitch accuracy-hear individual voices)</td>
<td>poster w/ colored circles 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>WARM-UPS</strong></td>
<td><em>Siren sounds</em> w/ <em>Flying Pup</em> (tossed in air)</td>
<td>stuffed animal/puppy dog 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>ECHO SING</em>: do, re, mi, sol, do</td>
<td>Curwen hand chart for reference 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>ECHO RHYTHM</em>: 4 beat patterns</td>
<td>Sticks – pair each under chairs 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>MUSIC Theory</strong></td>
<td><em>Quarter Note &amp; Quarter Rest = 1</em>&lt;br&gt;(use hymn page for Now Thank-clap each phrase)</td>
<td>laminated Qtr note &amp; rest visual 5&lt;br&gt;Quarter note/rest charts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>HYMN</strong></td>
<td><em>Now Thank We All Our God</em>&lt;br&gt;(echo sing each phrase; singers point to text)</td>
<td>printed page/Stanza 1 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ANTHEM</strong></td>
<td><em>The Fruit of the Vine</em> (echo by phrases)</td>
<td>draw vine w/ grapes on board 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ANTHEM</strong></td>
<td><em>Jacob’s Ladder</em> (listen &amp; watch melody)&lt;br&gt;(high – medium – low)&lt;br&gt;(learn verses 2 &amp; 3)</td>
<td>Ladder Glockenspiel &amp; mallet 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ANTEAMS</strong></td>
<td><em>10 Little Angels &amp; Chatter with the Angels</em>&lt;br&gt;(“was 1, were 2”) (clap x x x = all day long)</td>
<td>Laminated die-cut ANGELS #1–10 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>WORSHIP PREP</strong></td>
<td><strong>L</strong>: <em>The Lord be with you.</em>&lt;br&gt;(practice response)</td>
<td>acolyte: Emily (candle/match) 1&lt;br&gt;(candle lighter/snuffer)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PRAYER</strong></td>
<td><em>The Lord’s Prayer w/ motions</em></td>
<td>spoken together 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Goodbye SONG</strong></td>
<td><em>Go Now in Peace</em></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>