

In research undertaken by the URC Musicians' Guild 429 churches admit to having a choir. These range from the ad hoc group pulled together for Christmas or other special occasion to the formal choir, sometimes robed, who meet to rehearse regularly and perform introits and anthems as a regular part of worship. Both of these have a place in local churches as do all those in between. But if you don't actually have a choir or singing group and would like to form one, where to start?

Before you begin speak with the church leader(s) - it is good to have some enthusiastic support and be sure that this idea is welcomed.

Identify a leader.

This can be, but does not necessarily need to be, the organist/ pianist but many churches use a rota of people in this role and so it is not always practical to double up the rôles. It does need to be someone who understands, and is in sympathy with style of worship in the church, and will work with the minister, worship leaders and elders and, if a different person, with the organist(s). This does not mean that the music of the church will remain static but rather that new ideas and material will be introduced in a manner that makes everyone feel part of it.

Find some singers.

Some advice given to someone looking to form a choir from scratch was "pick choir singers, not soloists". Numbers are not the most important thing. Far rather 8 enthusiastic people who enjoy singing than 45 who perform in a half hearted way. Most people **can** sing. If you have ever been to a workshop led by the Wild Goose Resource Group from the Iona Community, you will know that to be true. And there are many other enthusiastic musicians who can get people to join in song. Anyone starting a singing group or choir could do worse than to read *The Singing Thing* by John Bell, published by Wild Goose Publications. Whilst it is useful to have people able to read music, it is not essential. Some regular choir singers began by following the shape of the music on the page, gradually learning to make sense of the hieroglyphics on the manuscript. If your choir members are all non-readers, make tapes for them of their part of a difficult piece. This way, the singers can rehearse at home and save valuable rehearsal time. Of course, having said that most people can sing there are some who do sound rather like an animal in severe pain, and these people should be encouraged to be part of the listening congregation or audience for where would singers be without people to sing to?

Arrange for a regular **Choir Practice**. Ten minutes before the service is not really a sensible way to proceed. A choir that meets regularly and for a longer time, begins to perform as an entity instead of a hotchpotch of disparate voices, and with that comes the opportunity to learn new, and sometimes challenging, music. It is also a good idea to draw up a plan outlining when and what the choir will be singing. The plan may have to be adjusted along the way but there will be a sense of purpose with targets to be aimed at. Regular practice has other benefits too as members begin to get to know and commit to each other, and work together in worshipping God.

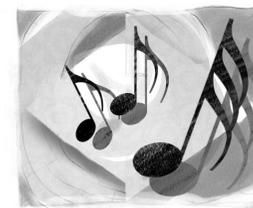
What to Sing?

In most local churches there is a cupboard stuffed with music, kept by those with the mindset that "it will come in useful sometime".

Some of it may be useful but a lot of it should be disposed of thoughtfully and carefully - preferably into the recycling bag! There may also be heaps of illegally photocopied material - please do dispose of that. A police choir in Wales knows the cost of photocopying material illegally and keeping it for future use (£32,000 and that was several years ago!)

Ask for a budget to buy some new material. Some people may be willing to buy their own music but it is necessary to be sure that such a cost does not deter others. Publishers like Kevin Mayhew and Stainer & Bell produce some excellent material for new choirs and there is masses of other suitable music around.

Select good, but quickly learnable, material at first. Of course, the material you select will depend on the voices you have, but be objective. It may be that other local churches may be willing to lend material and as the repertoire grows you may be able to reciprocate.



Start Simple and Start Small.

The *Hallelujah Chorus* is not a good starting place! Neither are all the pieces that you'll want to do after the choir is established and confident. If no one in your group has any choral experience, or even only a minimal amount, start with unison music. Eventually vocal ranges will become obvious and can be stretched here and there until your singers fall into the standard soprano/alto/tenor/bass categories. Even in unison singing you can have some variation it by alternating men and women's voices or using a small group for selected verses or sections. As the singers begin to "turn into a choir", don't try all four parts at once. If the altos are willing, let everyone sing melody and teach the altos their part. Or let the tenors sing the melody and give the tenor part of a hymn to the sopranos to sing an octave higher. Instant descant! A good idea is to find some rounds. Not *Frere Jacques* or *Three blind mice*. There are sacred pieces of music out there not much more difficult than those, and which sound wonderful. Most of us have sung *Seek ye first the Kingdom of God* as a round, and another, by that great composer Anon, is the lovely *Dona Nobis Pacem* which is really easy to sing. There is also a series especially for "Choirs that are short of Men"!

Morale Boosting is a MUST.

Be sure the choir is thanked for their work - from the pulpit, and/or in the magazine. An annual social event for the members is a good idea too. Another piece of advice given to that prospective choir-leader was "a good choir is a family". Occasionally there are opportunities to **join with other choirs** for events either local or national. Do take advantage of such opportunities for there is something very special about being part of a larger body and often performing music that would be far outside the scope of most church choirs.

And remember that the motto for all choir members and singing groups should be:

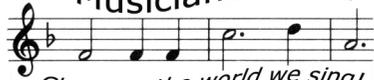
Not to us, Lord, but to your name be the glory!



The United Reformed Church Musicians' Guild

Forming a Choir or Singing Group



URC
Musicians' Guild

Christ for the world we sing!