

# Cantors...

## Of the People, for the People

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In the last *Quarterly*, Beatrice Fleo outlined a clear and careful approach to training cantors. This article offers yet another, indicating that there is more than one approach to the cantor ministry active in the Church today.

In some parishes, the principal musician is neither an instrumentalist nor choir director, but is in fact a cantor, and in some cases may be the only cantor. This implies a salaried person with substantial musical and liturgical competence.

In other parishes the role is exercised by just a few cantors who serve all the liturgies, are usually quite well qualified, and are often paid a stipend.

Both of these approaches to the cantor ministry can be very successful. Believing firmly as I do that the cantor is indis-

pensable to liturgical celebration, I am concerned, however, that the future of these two types of cantors can easily be jeopardized by annual budgeting cuts (one often hears tales of cuts in music budgets resulting in the dropping of qualified music personnel), or can be subject to the realignment of priorities which sometimes accompanies a change of pastors. If a new pastor or parish finance committee suddenly decides that they are paying too much for cantors, the parish music program—the song of the assembly—suffers a serious setback.

If the song of the assembly is to improve, as is desperately needed, we must develop a workable approach to the music ministry—an approach that insures a good life expectancy for that ministry. The operative term here is “build.” That

is, build in a consistent manner from year to year. The people who experience a series of different and often opposing approaches to implementing musical liturgy are likely to be left wandering aimlessly in a musical desert or sent into musical exile where they simply cannot sing the Lord’s song because they are not sure what song that is.

One aspect of developing steady growth is to develop a strong cantor program, a program that recruits persons from within the community and trains them to be cantors. This program will recruit and train perhaps as many as twenty individuals who, like the lectors, communion ministers, catechists, and [perhaps] sacramental preparation teams, become a viable ministry within the community—one that is not subject to sudden



extinction with the stroke of the finance committee pen.

Rather, this group of individuals from within the parish community—recruited for their ability to sing and willingness to commit themselves to ongoing training—makes an ever-increasing personal investment in their ministry, one that will not dissipate easily, but is assured of a certain perpetuity. This kind of ministry will build upon itself for the good of the whole.

To recruit such individuals one needs to be a bit creative. Look first to the parish choirs. These people are identified singers. One might be pleasantly surprised to find out how many of these folks are willing to do double duty as choir member and cantor. Also, seek out those within the community who sing well enough, but cannot make the weekly commitment required of choir members. Perhaps the less-consuming time requirement of the cantor ministry will appeal to some of these individuals. In the first issue of the *Quarterly*, I wrote an article on choir recruiting which offers some additional recruiting ideas equally applicable to the cantor ministry ("Calling All Singers," Spring 1990, 14–15).

Enlist those who can sing on pitch reasonably well (I always say that if the voice is inoffensive, it has the necessary raw material), who demonstrate basic musicianship (they can echo a phrase with tonal and rhythmic accuracy), who understand that ministry is service (yes, all must take their turn being scheduled for the less-appealing time slots), and who will be faithful to an ongoing development program.

The ongoing development of cantor ministry is the true key to success. Cantors cannot simply be trained, installed, and then left to do their ministry from that day forward. For a successful program, the development must be for life!—or at least until the cantor steps down. This means that cantors must commit themselves to regular rehearsals and training sessions so long as they remain active in the ministry.

One model for this approach might be cantor sessions held twice per month, e.g., the second and fourth Tuesdays. At the first session each month, the entire group of a dozen or more cantors rehearses all of the music to be used that month, much like a choir. The notes are learned; phrasing, style, interpretation, and good diction are developed; and musical confidence is built. Those who

do not read music well are encouraged to bring cassette recorders to help their at-home practice. If enough of the group utilizes tape recorders, the accompanist may even play each piece once through so that the accompaniment can be recorded without voices. At this session, members of the group can take turns

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singing the cantor parts, while the others take the part of the assembly. This, too, furthers the learning process and develops self-assurance.

At the second monthly session, various activities might be pursued. I have at times brought in guest facilitators to work with or address the group. One such guest might be a person well versed in the psalms, to help the cantors delve more deeply into these texts which they sing so often. Another might be a well-qualified voice teacher who spends time developing vocal technique. Another might be a spiritual adviser who spends an evening with the cantors exploring the spirituality of liturgical ministry. Some of these guests might be drawn from your parish's own pastoral staff, or from the diocesan resources, or from a local college or university. Some, such as the voice instructor, should be brought back often.

The second meeting of the month could also be used to schedule cantors for individual or small group sessions, so that the music director has twenty to thirty minutes once each month to work with each cantor on a one-to-one basis. This is often the best way to work on diction and other vocal techniques or problems.

Additional subjects for the second monthly session might be non-music matters such as gesture, movement, microphone technique, and spoken announcements. If rehearsals are generally held somewhere other than in the worship space, this offers an opportunity to occasionally rehearse individual cantors in

church with microphone and organ or other instruments. And this is a good time to deal with the technique of teaching a new hymn or song to the assembly.

While no one is excused from the music-learning (first) session each month (the better cantors are needed to serve as models for the others), some of the second sessions can be scheduled for just certain cantors who need to work on specific skills. During the summer, one may decide to drop the second session, meeting only once per month to learn the necessary music.

New cantors are added to the program by simply inviting them to begin attending rehearsals as part of the group. When the new cantor and the director mutually agree that the neophyte is ready, he or she can be scheduled for the first "knee shaking" liturgical experience. This will be almost immediately for some new cantors, and not until many months for others who feel the need to build a good deal of confidence and skill. I've known some candidates to faithfully attend rehearsals for up to a year or more and ultimately decide that this ministry was not for them—not unlike some candidates for other ministries in the Church.

This, of course, is only one model. It is a model that has worked for me, and one that continues to work in the parish I served, even after my departure some four years ago. The point is that each parish, according to its resources and the creative imagination of its staff, needs to design a program that will insure the development of a ministry which does not depend on one or two individuals, but is rather "of the people" and will continue of its own momentum once well established.

Let me put it another way: If I am the parish cantor, when I leave, the parish has to find another. That replacement may function in a manner which is totally different from the way I functioned, possibly leaving the assembly musically confused, or worse yet, less participatory. If, on the other hand, I have thoroughly trained fifteen other cantors and then vanish from the scene, the song will not even skip a beat. ■

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