

# Recruiting Young Cantors: Where Do I Start?

BY DIANA KODNER GÖKÇE

**W**hen they think about recruiting young cantors, many music directors don't know where to find suitable candidates or even how to begin looking. Parish schools and religious education programs are ideal places to start. Your parish school—or that of a neighboring parish or even a regional school—is bound to have teachers who can connect you with talented young singers. This is also an opportunity to open up communications with the parish school's music teacher or liturgy coordinator, which can facilitate collaboration on liturgies and paraliturgies such as confirmation and graduation.

Youth ministers are another good source for informa-

tion about musically inclined young people, and they might be willing to collaborate on a karaoke night or open mike night for teens, complete with refreshments. This would be a good place to observe and meet potential cantors. If you have a parish music room or music office, you might hold an evening open house for teens only or offer after-school drop-in times. Be prepared to talk about your music program as well as hopes you have for the future. Refreshments are always welcoming but so is the opportunity to play keyboards, pianos, guitars, and organs. If young people feel safe and comfortable in the environment, they are much more likely to return.

Parishes that are serious about involving young people in the liturgy should include liturgical ministry among confirmation community service projects. This might be helpful in educating the entire community that liturgical ministry is, in fact, community service. It is likely that a number of students would pursue this option, were it offered to them. If something more is required at your

*Ms. Diana Kodner Gökçe is a professor at National-Louis University in Evanston, Illinois, and a music teacher at Baker Demonstration School. She is perhaps best known as the author of Handbook for Cantors (Liturgy Training Publications).*



Participants in the 2003 National Catholic Youth Choir, St. John's Abbey and University, Collegeville, Minnesota





Cantor Angela Piekutowski ('03) leads sung worship at King's College, Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania.

parish, in the way of outreach or service, perhaps singing for nursing home liturgies would be appropriate.

Children can also be cultivated from a young age through children's choir programs and summer music camps. These camps can offer a kind of immersion in singing and liturgical music, and they afford the greatest opportunity for both training and getting to know young people in your parish. I have seen extremely successful examples of such programs, and they feed adult choirs as well as cantor programs.

Sometimes family connections lead to recruitment of young people. Parents who are cantors might be encouraged to bring their children along to rehearsals as an introduction to the ministry and a way to encourage them. I have even seen examples where two siblings were recruited together. If nothing else, they will be learning something about a parent's devotion to a ministry.

If you are looking for other approaches to recruitment, sometimes a teen-focused liturgy in which teens perform virtually all liturgical ministries—other than that of presider or deacon—is the best place to cultivate new cantors. I have worked at several parishes with weekly "teen" liturgies and have observed that young people are

much more comfortable stepping up to the plate when a number of their peers are doing the same. You need not pander to presumptions about teen taste. Exposed to a variety of good music, teens can enjoy everything in musical history from Gregorian chant onward. Rather than guessing at teen taste, strike a balance between their choices and interests and trying to cultivate new tastes, but don't try to guess at what they like or want without first having some dialogue and getting to know them.

### Recruitment and Training: Be Practical

When recruiting for any liturgical ministry, it is important to be concrete about what kind of commitment you are asking of people. What does a cantor do? What are the skills, personal attributes, or training required? Are there any measurable goals or objectives? To whom do the cantors report? What individuals or groups will the new cantor work with? What hours are required? Are they flexible or set? When will the ministry be performed? (Avoid scheduling teens for the earliest liturgy—teens need their sleep!) What are the benefits to the volunteer? Carefully consider the answers to these questions ahead of time, and try to frame them in such a way as not to overwhelm or discourage a potential recruit at the outset.

Once you have recruited young cantors, they will need to be mentored. Most teens prefer to work with others and would usually prefer to be mentored by a buddy than an adult. Try pairing each new cantor with a more experienced teen cantor in a kind of apprentice program. They can begin by singing together for liturgy until there is sufficient comfort for the new cantor to "fly solo."

Cantors should be in full communion with the church but need not be confirmed, as long as they are preparing for and working toward confirmation. Respect varied experience and learning styles. Offer recordings for cantors to check out from a liturgical music library in addition to sheet music (most publishers have recordings of their repertoire).

---

**When recruiting for any liturgical ministry, it is important to be concrete about what kind of commitment you are asking of people.**

---

---

---

---

Create a web site or at least a page in the parish web site devoted to cantors. Provide bite-sized information about upcoming liturgies and their Scriptures. Include downloadable sound files of cantor parts for monthly cantor repertoire that might be used for individual practice. (Of course, you should look into "fair use" laws and use copyright information to obtain permission from publishers.) Offer links to resources such as online metronomes ([www.metronomeonline.com](http://www.metronomeonline.com)); The Cyber Hymnal ([www.cyberhymnal.com](http://www.cyberhymnal.com)).

*Continued on page thirty-four*



## Recruiting Young Cantors

Continued from page thirty-one

cyberhymnal.org); The Silvis Woodshed ([www.channel1.com/users/gsilvis/](http://www.channel1.com/users/gsilvis/)), which provides sound files of some hymns and carols; free online ear training ([www.good-ear.com/servlet/EarTrainer](http://www.good-ear.com/servlet/EarTrainer)); and online music theory and history ([www.dolmetsch.com/theoryintro.htm](http://www.dolmetsch.com/theoryintro.htm)).

There are also many Catholic web sites specifically for youth that address many important life issues: [www.lifeteen.org](http://www.lifeteen.org), [www.disciplesnow.com](http://www.disciplesnow.com), and [www.youthapostles.com](http://www.youthapostles.com)—to name a few. (Providing such links is not so vital, of course, if you have a strong parish youth ministry program.)

Teens interested in improving their music reading skills might benefit from access to computer software such as *Music Ace*—or a comparable resource—and a computer at the parish where they can sign up for time. Be sure the computer has appropriate internet safeguards for young surfers!

Have a weekly practice with several young cantors, perhaps apart from the adults, unless there is already great comfort and rapport among all parties. This will allow you to assess readiness as well as facilitate preparation. Practice should be weekly, even if cantors will not

sing at liturgy every week. Arrange for new cantors to sing at liturgies at least every other week if at all possible.

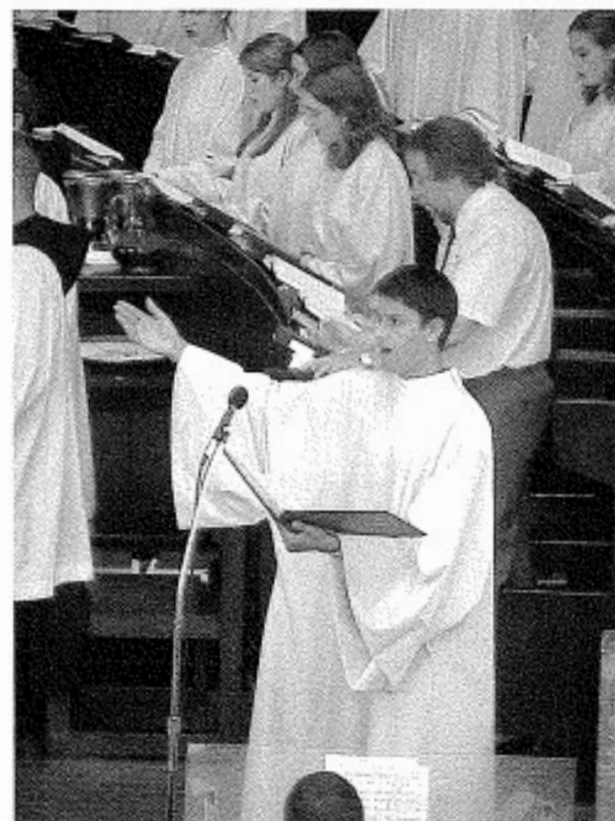
At the outset, it might be a good idea to offer an evening rehearsal devoted to practice techniques like note taking and other information literacy skills; young people need training in the skills used for practice. This session might begin with use of tools helpful to practice, such as a pencil; a mirror; a music stand; a keyboard, pitch-pipe, or other source for pitch; a metronome; a cassette recorder; and a dictionary of musical terms and notation such as *Elson's Pocket Music Dictionary* (The Oliver Ditson Company). Next, you might explore vocalization and warm-up techniques. I always include sighing, whimpering, and groaning in addition to the usual variations on a five-note descending scale. Some teens also enjoy lip trills and sirens. Combine what you know with a few new tricks.

Perhaps the most important thing to teach is how to "woodshed" a piece of music. I recommend students begin with their easiest or most familiar music, as it sets them up for success. Every piece could be practiced in the following way. Sing it first on a single vowel (preferably, their best vowel). You might want to explain that the vowel must be modified in the extremes of a vocal range. A long or unfamiliar piece should be broken down into sections—I use the saying: "You could eat an elephant if you took small bites!" Next, the music is spoken or chanted in rhythm on a single pitch, with careful attention to crisp, clear articulation. Then text and tune are combined, noting any difficulties such as pitch problems, rhythmic difficulties, running out of air, difficulties of range, sliding or scooping, and problems with tone quality. Problem areas should be circled in pencil. After going through the music once, the singer should then focus attention on the circled areas that posed problems. Problem areas should be corrected by slow, careful practice before being restored to the larger context of the music.

Teens benefit greatly from a choice, a voice, and independence. Provide these when you can. If possible, offer teens a choice between two settings of a psalm or between a seasonal psalm and the proper psalm of the day. If they have this one choice alone, when the rest of a Sunday's repertoire is set, they will feel increased control and investment. Offer a blog (web log) where teen cantors can freely and safely express themselves about the repertoire and the ministry. (This site can be—and should be—password protected.)

### For Years to Come

To maintain teen interest, it is important to provide age-appropriate retreats and even concerts where teens can perform their favorite sacred and liturgical music. These concerts will, in turn, draw more potential recruits. The focus on recruiting teen cantors may feed your parish ministry for years to come, but at the very least you will be performing good works for the people you recruit and the communities they will serve one day.



A participant in the 2003 National Catholic Youth Choir serves as cantor for Mass in St. John's Abbey Church.