The Cantor, After All, is a Member of a Team

BY JAMES HANSEN

For students of musical liturgy, (all of us), the timing of this study is excellent. While almost everything about this project recommends, it is the timing that seems to lend such grace to the findings. Some of the renewal began for musicians more than thirty years ago with the restoration of certain aspects of Holy Week. And we are marking twenty-odd years since the major documents on liturgy. That means that senior musicians among us who made those first fearless assaults (advances) into a strange frontier have a unique perspective with which to observe our present state. It means that those in mid-life, who were taught by their example, and who learned also from early miscalculation, are now equipped to deal with the findings in another way.

The role of the cantor seems to bear out this point, as well. At first glance our data indicate that the leadership of a cantor is not particularly effective, but this picture changes when we take into account how much of the singing the cantor usually does. Where the cantor sings less than 70% of the music, congregational participation rises sharply above that attained with any other kind of musical leadership. A similar phenomenon was observed with congregational singing itself. The congregation is much more likely to sing wholeheartedly if it is neither left to do all the singing nor virtually excluded by choir, folk group, cantor, or other musicians. In other words, a sharing of the singing among different elements in the assembly would seem to be the most effective way of enhancing sung participation.

The younger members of our profession have, however, the most difficult view. For those who choose to remain with this vocation throughout their working lives, there may seem to be an overwhelming variety of concerns dealt with in this report: for example, the data do not allow one to "get a handle" on or get control of the situation; and while older members of the profession were able to

Mr. Hansen is the coordinator/animator for the NPM School for Cantors.

(Reprinted from The Notre Dame Study on Catholic Parish Life, Report Number 5, "The Celebration of Liturgy in the Parishes," by Mark Searle and David G. Leengo.)

Cantor, NPM Regional Convention, Richmond, 1986
concentrate on one problem at a time. There is now a multiple choice of concerns to deal with at once. For each of these groups and for all those in between, this project has much to offer for years to come. It is a way to help us look into the past while charting the future.

The measurement of this activity, for which so many of us have given so much, presents some difficulties, however. The report is not without its hard sayings. One problem comes from our own isolation. Unless the situation is unusual, we work at our prayer craft every Sunday with, perhaps, two or three weeks off. What happens in our parish is known to us, as is, usually, what happens in the next two or three parishes, but the national scene, or even the regional picture, is far from being clear. So to read that some parishes continue in directions we long ago discarded, especially if we appear to be in the minority, is disturbing. There seems also to be a problem in percentages. How can such figures be accurate in a large worship setting during which so many people are observed for so short a time. Is it really 35% or is it really closer to 37%? But these are small difficulties indeed when compared with the problem many will have with misreading. When reading about the characteristics of urban, suburban, and rural/small-town worship patterns, there is a dangerous tendency to forget that these are symptoms. These are not problems or solutions to problems. Throughout the study, the notion of gathered community, and the ability of people to identify as community are focused. Worship patterns are symptomatic of an assembly’s self-identification. That is fairly obvious when one is a part of an assembly that considers itself a gathered community, a family of church.

There are a few items in the study that point to the use of the cantor in worship. They indicate that assembly participation has a better chance when a) the cantor sings less than 70% of the time, b) when the assembly does not have to sing alone, and c) when the choir or other musical forces do not overwhelm the assembly. Thus, the assembly is best served when a sharing of leadership occurs between different available musical resources: cantor, choir, instrumentals. While this is no great revelation, it could stand some review and expansion. If an assembly knows itself to be the gathered body of Christ,