

what i know now that i wish i'd known then: twenty years of youth choir ministry

BY SID DAVIS



It doesn't seem possible that I'm old enough to have done anything for 20 years. But my 25-year-old son begs to differ. Where do the years go? My mother used to tell me on days when I didn't want to go to school that if I would go and work really hard, the time would fly by. And she was right. The harder you work the faster time goes--or so it seems. Maybe that's part of what Einstein was trying to tell us.

Over twenty years ago I began working with youth and youth choirs. If you had asked me back then, I would have said they hated me and I was afraid of them. My early

groups were classic cases: mirrors if you will, of my lack of experience and focus where they were concerned. They drifted in and out of the choir, non-committed and unimpressed by what they were offered. Looking back, I would have been the same way in their shoes. Why dedicate yourself to a program or group when the leader himself has yet to figure it out? I'd love to go find some of those people today and say, "If it makes any difference, I did manage to get my act together. I'm just sorry you were one of the early victims."

I decided to put together a list to share with my colleagues who are in this same work, of truths I would have loved to have known in the 1980's. Granted, I might not have viewed them then as I do now since it sometimes

takes the difficulties themselves to open us up to a better way. However, I think we'd all be better off if we all put our cards on the table about basic philosophy and lessons learned as we go day to day. By no means do I think I've now cornered the market on wisdom about this most precious and valuable part of what we do. I'm always on the lookout for other people's lists of what works and what doesn't. I say, if you've got something to say, bring it on, but first let me get my pencil.

Right now, I'm looking at my own personal list and realizing that it's not in any particular order. For the purposes of writing this article, however, I need to organize it a bit better. I wonder what that will look like?

First of all, I think we pay lip service to this in the church, for we say it all the time—but I'm not sure how often we truly believe that **IT'S ALL ABOUT COMMUNITY**. I was a much happier director when I came to grips with the fact that the primary reason for young people gathering at choir time was not to sing, but to be with their friends. But for whatever reason they attend, once you've got them, give them some success as singers! Show them that they can accomplish anything as a group. Then music will grow out of the community and you will have the best of both worlds. It's important to note, however, that the formula can work the other way, as well. Recently, I conducted an all-state treble choir where the singers came from many different schools in many different cities and towns. There were only pockets of relationships scattered around the room. The trust level was low, and, consequently, so was community. It wasn't until the ice was broken and the girls began to let down their guard that real music was possible. Once that was accomplished, we were good to go.

This one may be the hardest to believe: **CHANGE IS HARDER FOR YOUNG PEOPLE THAN IT IS FOR ADULTS**. Some people will stop reading at this point, but I believe this to be true. Think about the times that you have seen youth programs or youth choirs that were devastated by the loss of a leader or some other major

change in the way things happen week to week. The repercussions can last for years and years and groups can come and go before the momentum is regained. While we don't want the fear of change to paralyze our groups, it's important to take into consideration that young people thrive on consistent leadership. Just remember: adults have lived through change and know that there is life on the other side. Young people haven't and aren't so sure.

The next, as the Bible says, is like unto it: TRADITION IS HUGE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE. Think about your youngest choir members, whether they be 7th graders or freshmen in high school. They look forward with all their might to what has become the tradition of your group. Tour, musicals, retreats—all that adds up in an enormous way for them and looking back, I wish that I had set about earlier on in creating traditions. I know that 'creating traditions' sounds a bit put together, rather like a microwave meal, but it can be done. The traditions on which you capitalize don't have to be super-involved or difficult to pull off, just identified as such and put to your advantage.

Why did it take me so long to realize that IF PARENTS DON'T GET IT, NO ONE ELSE WILL? Especially for your younger singers, parents are the gateway to choir and the buy-in and commitment must be constantly cultivated. Like many (most) of these other things, this is never a destination, but always a journey. One can never say on some Monday morning, "Well, there it is. My youth choir parents 'get it.' Now I can move on to something else." As soon as you begin to rest on your laurels, here comes a whole new set of parents who may not understand the importance of what is going on. The education process never ends.

Like anything else in life that's worth doing and is rewarding in the process, NOTHING TAKES THE PLACE OF HARD WORK. "Playing" choir never succeeded for anyone—it has to be the real deal. Now, if you love what you're doing and the results "feed" you, then hard work isn't a problem. Youth choirs thrive on it. But trying to form or run such an organization with what is left of you after the other program requirements gets us nowhere fast. This must be a priority for you, for the church, and for the parents who are going to help you. As Randy Edwards

says, "There is no harder work. There is no greater joy."

Again, this thought follows beautifully: YOU CANNOT DO THIS BY YOURSELF. A church musician friend of mine once told me "People want to help. They want to be put to work." I thought, "Maybe in your church. Not mine." I now recognize that as a rationalization. It seemed easier to just do things myself. Over the years, however, I realized that she was right. As the kids would say, she was "WAY right." There are people out there who will help in ways big and small and I'll be the first person to say that my youth choir wouldn't exist without them. They may take awhile to find and it may take some time to convince them that you're in for the long-haul, but they are there and they are willing and capable. Call for the cavalry. Send for reinforcements. Your whole day will be brighter.

You know the old realtor joke about the three most important words when buying a house, right? Well the same could be said here but the three words are COMMUNICATION, COMMUNICATION, COMMUNICATION. With the singers, with their parents, with the staff, with your pastor—overdo it. Make certain that everyone knows what's going on. And if you're not the world's best communicator, find someone who is.

When I first started out, I saw every young person as a potential recruit. You may say, "What's wrong with that?"

GREATER JOY!
There is no harder work,
There is no greater joy!
GREATER JOY!

Shouldn't we invite any and all?" The answer, of course, is yes. But once they are invited and invited again, listen to what they may be saying to you. THERE ARE YOUNG PEOPLE THAT ARE NOT GOING TO BE CHOIR MEM-

BERS, AND IT'S OKAY. This truth sometimes comes to us in very painful ways. Choir director's hearts do break. Sometimes we only find out this news after a painful process of someone coming to rehearsal who shouldn't. Many is the time that I beat myself up about losing (or never gaining) certain kids into the organization. The truth is, it's not for everyone and chances are everyone's not going to join. I'm sure that I've been guilty of overlooking some really faithful singers who are always present because one or two drifted away or suddenly dropped out. It happens. Now, this isn't salve for a conscience of a choir director who doesn't try to keep things together.

Rather it is a realistic look at who we have and who we will have in our ranks.

This might sound like a contradiction to something noted earlier, but I wish that at some point along the way someone would have said, "You know, you love this work. TRUST YOUR INSTINCTS." I believe that the people who are energized by young people most often have built-in barometers for the work that is to be done. I'm not saying to go full speed ahead with no outside counsel. That would be simultaneously foolish and exhausting for certainly we should look to others for differing perspectives. We wouldn't read periodicals like The Chorister if we weren't searching. But I believe strongly in the notion of 'calling,' and I believe that with it comes some form of inner compass about what we are called to do. Think, pray, journal. Listen to yourself.

KID'S KNOW. It's just that simple. If you love them, they know. If you're doing what you're doing for the right reason, they know. If you have their best interest at heart, they know. Conversely, if you're pretending, they know that too. Pretty scary, but absolute fact.

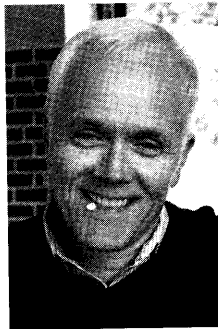
IF you love them, they know.
if you're doing what you're doing
for the right reason, they know.
If you have their best interest
at heart, they know.

Armies, so I'm told, run on their stomachs. CHOIRS RUN ON THE FACT THAT THEY LOVE TO SING. And the more often they get to do it, the better it is. Think about choir tour--long bus rides, harried arrangements and less-than-perfect conditions. Yet what does the choir do at the wrap-up party? They sing. They sing because that is who they are. Give them every opportunity. Long ago, when asked when the youth choir was going to sing, I would say, "Whenever they get these pieces ready." Hindsight tells me that was a not-so-sly attempt at handing off the responsibility to the kids. After all, if they didn't 'get it learned' how could I be held accountable? I now know how amazingly backward that was. Give them a goal. Choose the music, set the date. They will rise to the occasion.

Looking at my list as I began to write I thought, I need to save a really good point for last." Here it is:

SEEDS DO SPROUT. There have certainly been dark days for me over the last few decades when I thought no one would come, no one would learn, no one would grow. When you least expect it, when you're convinced otherwise, young people grow, lives are changed, congregations are inspired. Youth choirs can and do make a difference for entire congregations as we 'train up a child in the way he should go.' I can't think of a better way to build community, train worship leaders, strengthen local churches and to have fun than to build and maintain a youth choir.

Sid Davis is the Director of Music and Fine Arts at St. Luke's United Methodist Church in Houston, where he oversees a program including music for children, youth and adults as well as the Rotunda Theatre and Art Gallery. He graduated from Centenary College of Louisiana and did graduate work at the University of North Texas. Sid is a published composer/arranger and has recently become a Melodious Accord Fellow, studying under Alice Parker, as well as having toured with Fred Waring's Pennsylvanians as a soloist and instrumentalist. He enjoys traveling as a clinician for choral workshops around the country, but makes his home in Houston with his wife Cindy and their three children, Taylor, Meredith and Peyton.



The Chorister Music Specials

Concert Band - Stage Band - Marching Band - String Orchestra
Full Orchestra - Choral - Method Books - Solos - Ensembles
Handbells - Piano - Computer Software

25% Discount

We Want Your Orders!
School, Personal, Church or Community Group
Why Pay Full Price Plus Shipping?
Stretch Your Music Budget!

LOSERS' MUSIC

www.losersmusic.com
717/272-0381 800/522-2600
Fax: 717/272-6426

728 Cumberland Street - P.O. Box 616
Lebanon, Pennsylvania 17042

Minimum Order: \$50
All orders over \$300 receive a free gift!
(Tote Bag - retail value \$25)