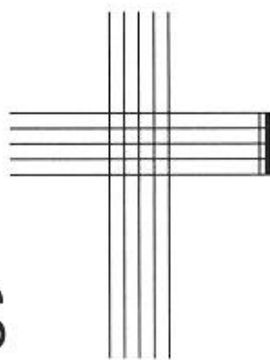


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*The Association of Anglican Musicians is an organization of professional musicians and clergy in The Episcopal Church and throughout the Anglican Communion. The Association works to elevate, stimulate, and support music and the allied arts in the liturgy of the Church. The Journal publishes articles on liturgy, music, spirituality, and theology which pertain to the work and purposes of this Association and to the Church in general.*

## A STILL, SMALL VOICE OF CALM: PASTORAL WORK WITHIN THE CHILDREN'S CHOIR

by Patrick J. Allen, D.M.A.

When I was in the sixth grade, one Sunday afternoon my mother suggested that I should go to church and sing in the youth choir; my response was, "Oh no, I don't think so; I'm busy." She informed me that I really wanted to do this and that she was very happy to drive me to the church and help me find the path to the rehearsal room. We came in the door and were greeted by a stern-looking lady sitting on a stool. She smiled and said, "We've been waiting for you; your seat is over there." She and I had a talk after the rehearsal; I told her that I had been brought against my will and was captive until someone came to take me home. She said that if I would come back and give it six weeks, and still wanted to, she would help me escape. I do not remember when the six weeks were up; we never talked about it again. Within a year I was taking organ lessons and, by high school, I became the organist of the church. That stern lady on that day became one of my most important teachers and friends. Her example and teaching form a great deal of the core of anything good that I have to offer.

She taught two very simple but profound principles: only the best we have to offer will do, and what each of us has to offer is very valuable. She was part-time at the church, but was kept very



**A Three-Choir Festival celebrating Grace Church School Weekend at Grace Church in New York City, January 26, 2002. The choristers of Grace Church with those of Saint Paul's Church, Fairfield, Connecticut (John Abdenour, Organist-Choirmaster), and Plymouth Church of the Pilgrims (Peter Stoltzfus, Director of Music), under the direction of Dr. Barry Rose, Organist and Master of Choristers Emeritus of Saint Alban's Abbey, England.**

busy with concert singing and a voice studio at the local university. Somehow she found time to instruct her choristers in a manner that identified her perception of our gifts and challenged the development and offering of those gifts for the benefit of the community, in church, in school, and beyond. She always said she was not a choral director, but a teacher. All her work in its various

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## A STILL, SMALL VOICE OF CALM

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manifestations became lessons. Her technique was simple: each singer was challenged to demand more than he or she ever thought possible of themselves and to make sure, that when the day was over, each had achieved specific goals by honest, hard work. She always remarked that she was an enabler, working with her students to make herself obsolete. She illuminated the path, but each chorister had to walk it, or not, for his- or herself.

These reminiscences are recorded here as the principles which inform my daily work with the choristers and young people of Grace Church in New York City and Grace Church School. My first director, Betty Jane Grimm, learned much of what she taught from her parents; she grew-up in a family that read the Bible and prayed together daily. Our world is a much different place from the one of her or my childhood. These lessons, however, still teach and form. I have discovered their application, along with the discipline they require, to be very effective in the several diverse situations and backgrounds in which I have been so far blessed to serve.

The lessons of my younger days did not take place in a choir school, or in a "spit and polish program," or one for choristers based on the RSCM training scheme. The music director was not an organist. The parish was a medium-size Southern United Methodist Church. The choir rehearsed once a week for an hour. It provided some structure for a youth program on Sunday evening that was anchored on one side by the choir practice and on the other by an evening service that the choir sang. Education, a meal, and fellowship filled the space between the rehearsal and the weekly service. Not all the participants were members of church families. They came from all over the city—partly to be with friends, but mostly they attended because some very special adults showed that they cared about young people and affirmed our presence with gracious hospitality.

My previous comments about choir schools, "spit and polish programs," or the RSCM training scheme are not potshots at them. I have had the honor of working in situations with them, and very much appreciate the resources and opportunities that they provide.

But what I so often hear is that, "Our program cannot possibly offer one thing or some other because we do not have the resources or time." Miss Grimm warmly demonstrated that, with vision and some tender loving care, anything is possible. She took a band of ragamuffins and formed us into a Christian community. The principles so far expounded could be applied to the development of a number of communities and to personal development. What was special about her program, and what made such a lasting impression on my own work with children, was that everything was based on teaching the Bible and centering lives on the example of Christ.

Her choice of music was extraordinary and diverse. We sang everything from Pergolesi, Haydn, Mozart, and Bach to Hal Hopson, Buryl Red, and many simple arrangements of old gospel songs. Each summer we staged a simple theater production, alternating between Gilbert and Sullivan and Broadway-type shows that she thought we could handle vocally. There was also a summer tour to sing services in churches around the state. It is interesting to note that we never sang a concert—we offered our music only in the context of worship with the communities we visited. She was very careful about the theology she taught through the choice of texts and how she explained them. She favored settings of texts taken directly from the Bible, not paraphrases, and texts which were personal testimonies about the transforming and empowering ability of God's grace. When someone like me would make a comment against doing anything but the music of Johann Sebastian Bach (I was very severe in my younger years), or when my best friend railed against anything that did not have guitar or drums in it, the answer would be the same. All the music had a place if it served to spread the Gospel and was offered as our best to the praise of the Creator. She widened our appetites and tastes with these lessons.

We never performed—we offered. We never led—we supported. Over and over we were taught about the many parts of the body of Christ and why our being different from one another was a blessing. "Why would a body need two heads?" Miss Grimm, our parents, and the Senior Pastor worked as a team. The entire program was centered around prayer and worship in which we were expected to participate actively. They never talked down to us, but lifted us up with affirmation and expectation. She was famous for saying, "Can't never could."

We were taught to make decisions by first being offered simple situations in which we had a voice. With each lesson learned, more responsibility was given, but always under watchful eyes. It was done so naturally that one could miss the whole process as, again and again, they demonstrated the care by which they led us on our journeys. We were always accountable for our actions. They were never interested in excuses for anything. They would listen to an explanation of why something did or did not happen, and then give advice or suggestions as to how a problem could be solved or averted in the future. But, heaven help the person who offered an excuse or pointed a finger of blame at someone else, denying his or her own responsibility for a situation. Miss Grimm was both advocate and judge.

I have taken a detour from my assignment, perhaps, by all this storytelling of former times. In sharing this formative time of my youth, I hope to offer my lesson in pastoral work with young people, especially children in the choir. Music education and the discipline necessary to form the choir are not the goals of the choir program. They become the tools by which we hope God's grace can be revealed, working in lives. It is here that the seeds for future teachers and church leaders are planted. Today, much of our work is missionary in nature. Children are not growing up hearing the stories of the Bible or learning the faith journeys of our forebears through the rich heritage of our hymnody. Virgil Fox said that the first things to practice when the organ goes on are the hymns. For the choir, it should be the same; our greatest responsibility is the support of the congregation's hymn singing. We can develop the sound and ability of the choir through anthems and solos, but it is the offering of hymns and psalms that should be the meat of our work.

It is interesting to speak with my contemporaries from that time in the youth choir, and to discover how many have gone into church administration, choral education in schools, church music, Christian education, and lay leadership roles in their local congregations. Consistently, when asked why they are specifically involved in children's ministry, the answer comes back, that they need to; they barely can put this call into words. It is not repaying a debt; somehow our experience years ago formed in us a need to be working with young people, retelling a story that was so lovingly and strongly shared with us. We are all active in many different types of education with as many styles and tastes as we are numbered, but the story with all its facets is the same.

Pastoral work in the children's choir means always holding up the living and healing presence of Jesus Christ for our young people. They find Christ's face everywhere. It is their extraordinary ability to notice what many older folks are too busy to recognize. This is most easily represented by the wonder shown on their faces as they learn new things during a simple moment filled with the sheer joy of learning. The leader helps them find the path to the discovery and enables them to share it with their classmates. Today I find that one of the most difficult tasks is protecting what little of their innocence remains. Engaging their imaginations and fantasies, and helping them to hold on to the ability to see the miracles of creation popping out everywhere, is also increasingly difficult. Those who have been around our rehearsals at Grace Church are aware of the amazing adventures my two cats have on a regular

basis. Our secular culture would steal their childhood and turn them into miniatures, both acting and dressing like adults, focusing on our "broken" world rather than on the beautiful gift of creation.

For my choristers, some of whom lived across the street from the World Trade Center complex, this has been a very sobering and challenging year. They have been asked to grow up very quickly by the disturbance of their peace and the normalcy of their lives. This year, the world truly has seemed broken. In the face of even this darkness, their love of music and of their choir has provided a structure whereby they have grown in strength and appreciation of the gifts they have been given in their families, communities, schools, and church. That appreciation, turned into music, has in turn given comfort and strength to many more who have found their way, many for the first time, into a church as they look to God for answers.

When I worked at Saint Thomas Church on Fifth Avenue, I was always undone by the miracle of Dr. Gerre Hancock working with his choristers. In the midst of the intense work and pace by which they prepare to offer all that great and glorious music, he always finds time to play with them and expand their imaginations. Through these extraordinary musical games and storytelling, each chorister is affirmed as a member of the community, and that which makes them unique is celebrated. This was also Miss Grimm's gift to us in that little church in Florida. Working with Dr. Hancock was like coming home. Rather than being molded into a strict, preconceived form, we were loved and nurtured; we knew we were safe in a way that allowed the miracle within, created by God, to be revealed in the sound of the choir. That sound in the music of the choir provides for many a vision of the face of Christ.

These great teachers were and are willing to be flexible and take the risk of allowing their choristers to bloom from within, to allow their programs to evolve as the community learns and grows. This task is not always easy. It takes a teacher willing to accept the good with the bad, taking responsibility as the leader for the work of the choristers. For all those wonderful successes, there will be those days of darkness, those days of a very young community, as all things go in cycles, the level of music-making being influenced by the state of those making it.

When I served in Delaware at the Cathedral Church of Saint John, it was a great honor regularly to call on Dr. Vernon de Tar. Dr. de Tar spoke over and over of pastoral musicianship, pounding his ideas of this important concept of our musical vocation into my head. As professional musicians, we all have those days when we just want to sit on the bench, practice, or spend time composing. And we get impatient with the day-to-day dealings of church administration and communication, of dealing with the new-found ego who perhaps exceeds what is appropriate by immature or arrogant behavior, and who challenges our own space with his or her demands. I hear Vernon's voice along with Miss Grimm's and Dr. Hancock's; I get my own ego slapped a little (or a lot!), depending on where it is, and I think of the beautiful text to "Dear Lord and Father of mankind." That "still, small voice" mentioned in the hymn speaks, and I stop myself, listen, and take a step back toward what has brought me to that particular moment. The music is the tool, but it is the care of and hospitality for the faithful that is



the work. I pray for all young musicians that there might be a Miss Grimm in their formation or, even more important, that we can be that type of minister in the lives of our choristers. Not all lessons are learned the moment they are offered. The best lessons reveal new insight as they mature within the student over years of life experience and application. It is this work that will plant the seeds for the lay leaders, church musicians, and clergy of the future.

The Association of Diocesan Liturgy and Music Commissions offered a conference some years ago, just as I was beginning in Delaware. The Canon Pastor suggested I go with him and the Christian education person as the topic was, "All God's Children." We thought from the title that it was going to be a conference about Christian formation in the varied areas of children's ministry. The wonderful and heartwarming surprise for the three of us was that the conference centered on the Baptismal Covenant and the revelation that a child remains within each of us as we are born anew in the waters of Baptism. We learned that it is the continuous care of, and communication with, the "child within" that allows us to grow in that journey and to tell our faith stories. The conference reinforced for my work what I had learned by the example of my first teacher. She treated everyone with the same dignity and love. The expectations were no different for the youngest chorister than for the most senior member of the adult choir. There was no dumbing down or looking up, only an eye-to-eye relationship full of genuine care and love, willing to repeat without ceasing that Jesus loves you, full of expectation for us all to offer our best in the worship of the Almighty.

### Practical Applications for a Children's Choir Program

1. Create a safe environment in which your choristers can grow. If the boundaries of the community and its goals are not defined or are continually changing, the instability will inhibit the ability of members to communicate and evolve; trust will not take hold. The community will be temporary, based on the charisma of the leader.
2. Communication with parents is essential. A regular dialogue with the parents keeps the children from being able to triangulate authority about supervision and expectations. It is essential to let parents know in advance what the requirements for membership are; in this manner the conductor begins teaching the parents. When they agree to membership for their child, they are making a family commitment to support the program and to know in advance what is expected. Teaching parents how to support a program is vital. Most parents today have not had choral music in civic or church programs, and they do not understand the necessary discipline. Just like the choristers, they must be taught what is needed and how to provide it in a manner that respects the community of the choir. A choirmaster can be overwhelmed by their support, but they have to know what is needed in order to provide it.
3. Rome wasn't built in a day. Small victories and successes quickly add up to big ones. Take one small thing at a time. Everyone is so overstimulated and busy today that a first goal might be just to focus on the moment. So many are too busy

checking off the "to do list" or worrying about what comes after the rehearsal or service to be mentally present.

4. The first big issue is recruiting. We should all have a nickel for every time a parent says, "I want my child to be a part of the choir, but they are not interested." I would not be writing this right now if my mother had taken that approach. I tell my own story (I have heard the same from other choirmasters) to the parents when this comes up and suggest they set up a trial period. The child, parents, and choirmaster talk at the end of this time. If choir is still not their "thing," then the child has met a commitment and can feel good about moving on. The choir and parents can then support the child in whatever new activity is chosen; the child begins to learn about making commitments.
5. "Gentle strength." We all have our individual styles of communication, both publicly (such as in a rehearsal or service) and in personal relationships. But a gentle and demanding word often takes one much farther than a lot of theatrics. The old saying that honey attracts more flies really holds true. Christ overturned the tables in the temple. Sometimes strength of conviction in an active way is essential; it shows that we care and that what we believe in, we do. But, a lot of yelling and drama only fuels yelling and drama; it dulls the senses.
6. So much of what is called teaching is just the teacher taking credit for the natural talents of the student. Real teaching is taking time to develop the talents of one whose gifts may not be as noticeable. It is worth the effort.
7. Mistakes are an important part of learning. Today we are so spell-checked and edited that perfection seems to abound everywhere. It really is only an illusion. Being afraid to make a mistake in rehearsal inhibits many from truly learning and can create some bad technique. Learning the time and place for experimenting and discovery is a very good lesson as well.
8. Never tolerate sloppy or lazy behavior. When we suffered from this, Miss Grimm would tell us of being a little girl in her mother's kitchen. She said to her mother, "I'm bored." Without missing a beat, the response came, "Of course, you're boring." She said that after that moment she was never bored again.
9. Children are natural indicators for honesty and truth. It is unnerving that we cannot hide our own insecurities from them. This can be turned into a great tool for formation if we show them how to deal with it; or it can be very destructive if we deny our own humanness. Never be afraid to apologize and to take responsibility for mistakes. It is one of the greatest lessons that one can give.
10. How secure are you in your teaching? Remember, children will test your boundaries. Be ready to stick by them and then to be tested again. After a while, children will settle down and the security that comes from this will allow wonderful miracles to happen. Then, they will test those boundaries again.

11. Trust your vision. Many will say, "It can't be done. The world is too different, children don't have time. We need to make it more fun!" This may all be true, but we all make time for what is important and for what has meaning in our lives. If one creates a program that touches the children's lives, and they take pride in being part of it, they will come and bring their families with them. (Go back to Number 3 on this.) Ask them for what they can give, and accept no less, and pray a lot. Adults and children quickly give up when they perceive that they cannot accomplish the goals.
12. Remember that we are all working for the good of the children. Too often the Christian education and music departments fight for the time and commitments of families. Work together. Once, a well-meaning person suggested that a church in which I was serving needed to build a stronger children's education program. I politely suggested to him that he was looking too much with "program" eyes. The choir of boys (and later, girls) had been serving faithfully since the 19<sup>th</sup> century with countless stories coming back from the alumni of the amount of scripture, theology, and formation which they had learned through the discipline of the choir. The choir also recruited from outside the congregation and so brought in new families. I suggested to him that we already had a very old and healthy program. What this well-meaning person meant to say was that he wanted to provide additional Christian education opportunities for young people.
13. Give thanks to God every day for the honor of working with children. ◊

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*Patrick J. Allen, D.M.A., Organist and Master of Choristers at Grace Church in New York City, previously served as Director of Music and Fine Arts at Independent Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, Alabama. Prior to that appointment he served as Associate Organist at Saint Thomas Church, Fifth Avenue, New York City, and Director of Music and Organist at both The Cathedral Church of Saint John and Congregation Beth Emeth in Wilmington, Delaware. During the summer, he is on the faculty of the Baroque Performance Institute held at the Oberlin College Conservatory of Music, Oberlin, Ohio. With Catherine Rodland, he co-authored The Chorister Training Program of The Royal School of Church Music in America, an American adaptation of the English model Sing Aloud. Allen has received degrees from the University of North Texas and Florida State University. He was awarded the degree Doctor of Musical Arts and the Performer's Certificate in Organ from the Eastman School of Music as a student of Russell Saunders. In Amsterdam, Allen studied with Gustav Leonhardt and Veronika Hampe. In 1988, he was a finalist in the American Guild of Organists' National Open Young Artists Competition. He has been heard as a soloist on the organ and harpsichord throughout the United States and Europe and in many chamber music programs, especially with violinist Mary Hoyt in the duo Sounds Resounding. He has recorded with the Saint Thomas Choir on the Koch and Priory labels. Allen has given numerous workshops on the Chorister Training Program and frequently is guest conductor, most recently last summer at the RSCMA Hartford Summer Course for Girls.*