

Ward Choir Director

Part II: Getting People to Choir

CJ Madsen – May 26, 2020

(This is “Ward Choir Director According to CJ”, not doctrine.)

In my last Music 135 class, I asked the class, “Why have you gone to ward choir in the past?” Here were their responses:

- They were dating someone in the choir/ thought someone in choir was cute.
- They didn’t have a lot to do on the Sabbath, so they figured they’d come.
- They had a connection with the choir director (a family member or friend).
- They were forced to go by their family.
- They had a calling related to ward choir and so felt responsible to go.
- They went as a missionary in order to cultivate good member relationships.
- They felt like a needed and important part of ward choir.
- They loved to sing at every chance they got.
- They got food when they went to ward choir.
- They loved the music in ward choir and felt the Spirit when they attended.

You can see from this list that there are a lot of reasons people go to ward choir, some more noble than others. But from this list, we as a class gleaned some core principles that are key to learning how to draw people to ward choir. Ward choir members want to feel:

- The Spirit
- Loved – the love of God, the love of Christ, and the love of Saints
- Needed and important – not a name on a page or an expendable nobody

If these elements are in ward choir rehearsal and in your interactions with ward choir members, people will come to stay, and the King-Lamoni-fathers of your ward will have their hearts softened by the Ammon-like love you show (see Alma 20:26). If these elements are not there, good luck getting people to stay in ward choir, and King Lamoni’s father might just chop off your head.

Based on these premises, and my experience conducting ward choir, here are my main three points of advice for getting people to come to ward choir: use personal invitations, adapt to needs, and love and praise the choir.

I. Use Personal Invitations

Let me say that again: PERSONAL INVITATIONS. Personally invite people to come to choir. Personally invite people to each choir practice and performance. Personal invitations, personal invitations, personal invitations!

The Savior ministered to the Nephites “one by one” (3 Nephi 11:15), and that’s exactly what you need to do in order for people to feel that you care. It takes lots of extra effort, but it’s worth it. Here are some practical applications of this principle:

- If you want to find new people to come to choir, go through Member Tools and find phone numbers for people you want to invite. It can be people you know or people you don’t – I’m sure an unknown person in the ward would in general be flattered and grateful you had the thought to text them! Then send an individual, personalized text inviting them to choir practice.
- Every week, contact everybody who usually comes to ward choir practice and remind them about rehearsal. Do whatever method is most comfortable for the person you’re reaching out to. Typically, people younger than 40 like texts, and people over 40 like calls. Contacting everybody in choir usually takes 30 minutes – yes, that’s a lot of time, but I PROMISE your attendance will be WAY better.
- When texting people individually, be sure to mention their name in the text – this helps them know you sent the message just to them and it wasn’t a group message. If you want to save a little time, you can figure out a few “info sentences” that are the same for all texts. Copy/paste that body in, and then add a quick sentence at the beginning to make it personal. Don’t let your message be too long – the longer the text, the more people will think of it as a scripted, for-the-masses message, or not have time to read it.
- NEVER use group messages as a substitute for individual, personalized messages. I can think of no better way to kill attendance/interest. The problem with group messages is that we are all bombarded daily by a sea of “group messages” from clubs, classes, companies, chats, etc., etc. If the ward choir message is not personalized, there’s an 80-90 percent chance that it will be overlooked, ignored, or forgotten. Only use group messages or Facebook posts as a supplement to individual messages or to get the word out fast in the case of an emergency.

II. Adapt to Needs

Jacob described this trait of Christ: “The one being is as precious in his sight as the other” (Jacob 2:21). Since everybody matters, do all you can to adapt to individual needs and concerns in order to help people feel loved and wanted in the choir, while still maintaining consistency and basic rules. Follow the Spirit and seek personal revelation.

Here are some examples:

- Schedule 15-minute appointments (again, schedule this individually) with lots of ward members to get their advice about what you could do to help ward choir be a spiritual experience for choir members and listeners in the congregation. Then follow the Spirit in concluding the meeting with invitations (whether that is inviting the person to participate in ward choir or inviting them to just be active listeners when they hear the ward choir sing). This will not only help you find needs but help get committed ward choir members.
- Enlist help by having additional choir callings. In the past I have had choir presidents who helped copy music, choir section leaders who helped invite people weekly to choir, and choir babysitters who came and played with my children and other choir children during rehearsal.
- Take attendance so you know who is not at ward choir practice. Within an hour after rehearsal ends, contact each absentee individually and let them know they were missed and find out if everything is okay. You don’t need to guilt-trip them at all – there are lots of things more important than ward choir. If you do it with love and friendliness, then this will just let people know they were remembered – and that’s important.
- If people can't make it to ward choir because of other conflicts, ask if they would like to still sing in choir through other methods. For example, you take over sheet music they can use to practice on their own, then they can just hop up and sing with ward choir in sacrament meeting.
- If you notice that a ward choir member hasn’t come to rehearsal for three weeks in a row (despite your individualized texts), reach out to them and see how you can best help them. If they need a break from choir, don’t harrumph about it – just show your love and support them in that choice. Then just check in on them every couple of months to see how they’re doing, and give soft invites to return, if prompted.

III. Love and Praise the Choir

The Lord said, “Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). When people come to choir, they want to feel like it’s a rest and not a burden. If your rehearsal and interactions with choir members are full of praise and love, they will not only feel like ward choir is a rest but will be willing to go with you in improving the sound/musicianship of the choir.

Here are some tips from my experiences:

- Do whatever it takes to know the names of your ward choir members as soon as possible. Make a PowerPoint, practice every week as part of rehearsal, ask and ask again – do **WHATEVER IT TAKES** to learn names fast, because knowing somebody’s name is another way of saying “I love you.” Find ways to help choir members learn each other’s names, too.
- Once you know the names of choir members, work every week to get to know more about choir members – interests, school, job, family. If you ask questions and listen more than you talk, you’ll learn stuff, and it will help choir members feel loved. Also create time/opportunities for ward choir members to talk with each other. This could be treats before/after a rehearsal or discussing gospel principles from the text in small groups.
- Praise the choir about the good things they are doing. Too often all choir directors say are things to improve – you should say just as many things they are doing well as things to improve on. When you give praise, be specific in your feedback. Rather than say, “good job on that verse,” say “Your rhythm was fantastic in that part, and tenors, well done with the intonation there!”
- Remember, the choir wants to feel the love of the Savior, so speak of Him and testify of Him. Make time in every rehearsal for a discussion of the doctrine of what you are learning. And get the choir members talking more than you in these sections – if they are sharing their thoughts (whether to the whole choir, in groups, or writing down to themselves), the message will mean more to them.

If, at the end of the day, you have a tiny ward choir, but lots of people in the ward feel loved, then I think you're a success. If you spend a lot of energy and time griping about how not enough people come to ward choir, you'll not have the Spirit, and the ward members will feel it. Just consistently invite with love, help adapt to needs, and love and praise people, and slowly and surely, the ward choir will grow in numbers and in spiritual power.