

The Care and Feeding of Youth Handbell Choirs

by Karen Thompson



a resource for members of
Handbell Musicians
OF AMERICA

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Introduction

In the past twenty-five years, I have started and conducted three successful youth handbell programs. The purpose of this resource is to inspire you and share some tips and insights.

My focus is slanted towards a church setting, but some ideas could translate to other settings. For this resources, “youth” is defined as middle school and high school. Children’s bell programs (elementary age) are an entirely different animal and would be a completely different resource.

Part 1: Starting a Youth Handbell Choir

Are You Crazy?

First of all, why would you even want to start a youth handbell choir? Do you know how difficult it is? Young people are late to rehearsal, they talk during rehearsal, they forget about rehearsal, and they may even forget on a Sunday morning that they are supposed to be ringing in church! They don’t how to make and honor commitments, which every handbell director knows is vital to a successful handbell program. It takes more work outside of rehearsal to start and maintain a youth bell choir, much more work than an adult bell choir, and even more work than a children’s bell choir. So, why even bother?

You may think I was over-generalizing in the preceding paragraph. It’s true, not all youth are commitment-challenged. However, it is my experience that an overwhelming majority will have commitment issues at some point during the year, and that will cause frustration to the director and the rest of the group.



Throughout our interactive e-books, click on links in the sidebar to find more online, download supplemental documents, watch videos, contact the author, and more.

So is it worth the hassle? I definitely think so.

Reasons Why

Youth make incredibly great ringers! They learn fast and love challenges. Some of the best groups I have ever heard and conducted were youth choirs. If you love conducting advanced groups, start a youth bell choir.

But is that enough of a reason? Have I convinced you, yet? No? Here are several more reasons. The team effort that is unique to handbells can be a very powerful ministry. By being part of a team, they have an important role to fill. You will find a few young people whose only link to church is participation in bell choir. Youth often tell me that they join the bell choir to be with their friends, so don't kid yourself into thinking that it is all about the music. But they also tell me that they love being part of a music ministry and love leading worship. Belonging to team, playing an integral role in a group, coming to church, and leading worship can be important and powerful experiences in the spiritual and individual development of a young person. And yes, they do enjoy making music.

Here's one final reason, and perhaps the most important: Youth need to learn how to make and keep commitments. What better place than in a bell choir, where commitment is so crucial?

Starting a Youth Bell Choir From Scratch

Let's address the "how-to-start" part. First of all, begin with yourself. My advice: Come from the standpoint of "youth worker" first and "handbell conductor" second. Know that the young ringers will let you down at times. Just love 'em and forgive 'em.

One of the most difficult decisions is determining a rehearsal time and keeping that time sacred. The best times are just before or just after they are already at church participating in worship or other youth activities. You must work with your youth pastor, other church staff,

and youth committee. If your program is to be successful, it is essential that everyone be in your corner. If you don't have the support of the other youth workers, you are doomed! Honor the other youth programs and ask that they honor yours.

Recruiting

Next comes the recruiting. Go to where the young people are—Sunday school, youth group, wherever they gather. Make phone calls. They don't read the church newsletter, and only a miniscule percentage will read a target mailing. Speaking with them one-on-one is vital. I've started youth programs in three different churches, and I always start with a come-check-it-out period, usually about three or four rehearsals. I've called it "test-drive" and "rookie training camp."

Try to reach the musicians and non-musicians. Play up the fact they don't need to know how to read music (and don't worry about it, they learn quickly). For those who are musicians, emphasize the fact they will love learning a new instrument. Tell the jocks that athletes make great bell ringers. Of course, tell the band members that they make great bell ringers. Remember, the youth will join the bell choir to be with their friends. The biggest recruiting tool of them all: persuade a few of the influential kids to agree to come for the "test-drive" period and enlist them to recruit. The youth are much better recruiters than we are. If you get a few key teens excited about it, they will bring their friends.



Click [HERE](#) to download the First Rehearsal Lesson Plan and accompanying materials

First Rehearsals

Know that the first rehearsals will set the tone for the program. Start with a brief and quick rundown of the rules for the room (no gum, no leaning on tables, no horseplay, etc.) Don't address the "commitment" issue in the first few rehearsals. That comes later. First you have to hook them, and that will require some FUN rehearsals.

For those first few rehearsals, start at the very beginning ("this is how

you hold a bell”), but talk quickly and progress through all the basics as fast as you can. They learn considerably faster than young children and adults, so RUN! In the appendix, you will find a lesson plan for a first rehearsal. (See Appendix A) [Link to Appendix A] Don’t omit anything, even if there are a good many of them who have already rung. Acknowledge those who have rung before and tell them it will be a “review” for them. Verbalize that you will call upon those with experience to help the rookies, and then do so.

As fast as possible, get into a real piece of music. I always start with level one if there are more than half who have never rung. (I might do a level 1+ or 2- if over half have some ringing experience.) Music selection is important—more about that topic in the Part II section. But in the beginning when you are playing easy music, you don’t want anyone to be bored. Even if they are all novice ringers, you might have some great musicians who pick it up so fast that they could plop down into your level 3 adult group. They might not be bored the first or second rehearsal, but they will by the third or fourth.

So, here a few tips on how to keep the more adept ringers challenged. In level 1 music, you can combine position 1 (CD4) and position 2 (EF4) into one position. Give that all-state trombone or clarinet player a quick lesson in weaving. That’ll keep him out of trouble! Next, you’ve got the students who have taken piano for 8 years and/or who have some ringing experience. Give them a crash course in Shelley and 4-in-hand ringing. If you are only playing a three octave piece but have five octaves at your disposal, ask them to double some of the notes 8va. It is better in the beginning to first double with octaves rather than create a position that is, say, G6, A6, B6, and C7. If you only have three octaves at your disposal, then double G5 with G6, and C6 with C7. In these first rehearsals, don’t worry if you don’t have enough ringers to cover all the positions. Pick music with stacked chords, and they won’t mind a missing part or two (but mention it so that you can enlist them to help fill the “empty spot”). Do pick music with techniques (swing, shake, mart). Techniques are fun! Teach them something simple that can be rung in church ASAP.

Commitment

As the “test-drive” period concludes, sit down with them and discuss the bell program. This is the point in which commitment is discussed. It is best to include the parents, especially if your group is middle school. Please know that this is only the first of many discussions you will have regarding commitment. Include other things on the agenda, such as name for the group, what to wear, and worship leading.

Part 2: Maintaining an Established Youth Handbell Choir

Starting a youth bell choir is a challenge. Maintaining a youth bell choir is even a bigger challenge! But your hard work can reap big rewards. Below are some practices that have worked for me.

Communication

This might come as a revelation to you, but youth don’t know what they are doing tomorrow. You can announce that you are playing in church next Sunday, but they won’t remember that fact on Saturday night or even Sunday morning. You must call them and remind them. E-mail and postcards work somewhat, especially with parents of middle schoolers, and I do use those forms of communication—but I don’t rely on them. If you expect your young ringers to be present, you must call. I’ve also had good luck with texting. If they have a cell phone, call or text that number instead of their home number. I call or text about 90% of the time to remind about rehearsal. This practice underscores the importance of commitment. I give them my cell number and ask them to call me if they are going to miss a rehearsal. It usually takes a while, but eventually most will call when they are going to be absent. I

hand-out AND mail AND e-mail rehearsal and worship schedules. But picking up the phone on almost a weekly basis has been crucial to my success.

Adult Helpers

Enlist adult ringers to sponsor your program. It is so helpful to have roaming mentors behind the tables. If one ringer is lagging behind the group, the conductor doesn't have to stop to address that one person. Remember that keeping rehearsals at a brisk pace is important for keeping up interest and fun levels. Always have your adult sponsor ready to step in and play when you are ringing for worship, as it is typical for youth to be no-shows without notice, even if you called them the night before to remind them. (You may hear: "I overslept". "I forgot." "We went out of town." "I was at a sleep-over." And my favorite: "I didn't know we were ringing today.")

Music Selection

Music with thick, stacked chords is best with beginners. Not only do youth enjoy staying busy (and what ringers don't?), but thick music is easier to master than thin, single line, exposed music. Techniques add fun to easy music, but please teach correct execution from the beginning. For beginners, music that has a moderate tempo is easier to master than slow. Keeping novice ringers from rushing is difficult, especially when they are nervous. As you progress to more difficult music, it is important to choose music that young ringers will like. If they are bored with the music, you will lose them. Youth like fast, rhythmic pieces. They can pick up mixed meter much faster than adults. But I will choose at least one piece a year that is lyrical with a beautiful melody. I select pieces to be in our repertoire for an entire year. We work up pieces and keep them in the binders. During the year, we travel to other places (churches, schools, rest homes—performance opportunities are out there), and we also do a year-end concert. Performance is a motivator. Not including Christmas music, my previous high school

group mastered about four pieces per year that are level three to four. Which brings me to...

Memorizing

Out of those four pieces, one or two are memorized. Memorizing a piece of music and performing it is extremely satisfying. Jason Wells, who conducted the phenomenal youth group Ring of Fire, once told me that with youth, you must set the bar high; not only can they reach it, but it keeps them coming back for more. Memorizing really ratchets up your performance level and allows the youth to really connect with the conductor and each other. Also, the response from the listeners is extremely affirming! My preference is to memorize a piece that has no bell changes so that no tables are needed.

Assignments

Isn't it frustrating that bell ringing needs exact numbers of bodies? What a headache that each assigned part needs a person! If (or more precisely "when") someone drops out in the middle of learning a piece, what do you do? Well, your adult helper can fill a spot. But here is another approach. Are you lucky enough to have a set of chimes or a second set of bells? If so, then I propose that you double parts. This especially works well with large numbers. Place two ringers who share music on the same part. If doubling with chimes, I have the most proficient musician on bells and, if the bell ringer is absent, then I "promote" the chime player to bells. Youth bring friends, but you never know if they will stick with it. Even with only 10 or 11 ringers, I often will do a two octave piece with a few parts doubled. Are your numbers small to begin with? There is more and more music available for four to six positions. One last idea: You can always ring while you conduct, and guess what? It's kind of fun! I've had every size group, from 4 to 28! Any size will do, but save yourself some future headaches: Know that, with youth, the number of ringers is a moving target, and plan accordingly.

Rehearsal Tips and Techniques

Prepare your rehearsals well. Discipline problems occur in between ringing. The solution? Ring the entire rehearsal! Yep, don't talk—they don't listen anyway! Plan your rehearsal so that you know how to teach every challenge in advance. Teach complex rhythms with mallets on the tables or on the bell cases. Pull out someone's passage and write the rhythm so that all can see it, then demonstrate it, and have them jump in when they've got it. Talk to them over the ringing. Call their names and constantly praise. If there is a wrong or missing note, call out the name of the bell instead of the ringer.

When starting a new piece, have the ringers count aloud instead of you doing it for them. As quickly as possible (usually the second rehearsal of a piece), take the "aloud" part out of the equation. When you ask them to stop counting aloud, make sure they understand that they are still counting in their head.

Teach how to do page turns. Ask that they mark which hand is going to turn the page. Discuss strategies such as turning early, memorizing, writing out a measure, and dog-earring the music.

Teach how to recover from getting lost. It will happen, so plan on it. Turn it into a game! Teach conducting patterns, and then have them clap on beat one and then on other beats. Without speaking aloud, mouth a measure number and see if they can tell what number you are saying (they can). Then ask them to look at you when lost. Reassure them that you will mouth the measure number on beat one. Then have one or two ringers close their eyes, and then show the rest of the group where to start. Have the ringers open their eyes and give them a general idea of where you are starting, such as the middle of page 3. Start the group and see how fast they can recover. It is usually just a measure or two. I always say "It is okay to get lost, but it's not okay to stay lost." Playing the "Getting Lost" game helps build confidence and reduces panic when playing for worship or in concert.

Teach how to watch the director. This is a skill and, like other skills, it has to be taught and nurtured. Ask that they look up at least one time per measure. Underline the fact that peripheral vision is not enough. At the beginning of the year, do simple exercises such as ringing quarter notes with alternating hands while you change tempos and dynamics. When doing the exercises, do not count aloud. When learning a new piece that has tempo changes, again, do not count aloud and insist that they watch. Have I said “do not count aloud” enough? When you count aloud, you are giving permission not to watch. When you count aloud, you may be inhibiting their ability to independently track music. When you count aloud, you quash the opportunity to learn how to recover from getting lost.

Youth Conductors

To retain youth ringers as they get older, you must continue to challenge them. One idea is to teach conducting. I gather any senior high school students who are interested and teach a three-hour seminar. Then I give them the opportunity to conduct in rehearsals and worship. Sometimes they have worked with established children’s bell choirs, sometimes with their peers, and, in one instance, I have had a high school senior conduct an adult group. This is valuable training for future worship leaders and provides some wonderful experiences for all involved.

Pigs-In-A-Blanket

OK, you know the scenario: it’s Sunday morning and you have 20 or 30 minutes to warm-up the bell choir before worship and, as usual, 90% of them show up anywhere from 5 to 29 minutes late! OK, here is a secret: Youth are punctuality-challenged. Here is a solution: Plan for it. I build in 15 to 20 extra minutes and provide donut holes and pigs-in-a-blanket. Those on time get to eat, latecomers don’t. At the appointed time in which they are to be there, I pull out my cell phone and start calling.

Measuring Success

When is a youth handbell program successful? Is it a high level of difficulty that is accomplished proficiently? When you discover that your ringers have learned how to make and honor commitments? Perhaps when your graduating seniors report that being part of a music ministry greatly impacted their spiritual development? When your youth become adults and return home and join your adult program? I hope you can answer “all the above.” If you are crazy enough to start a youth handbell choir, then roll with the ups and downs and keep your eye on the big picture. Your youth will be blessed by your efforts, and so will you!



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