

Organizing a Handbell Program

# Mission Aspects of a Handbell Program

by Karen Eastburn



a resource for members of  
**Handbell Musicians**  
OF AMERICA

## **Organizing a Handbell Program - Mission Aspects of a Handbell Ministry**

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# Introduction

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Are you:

- Starting a new handbell ministry?
- Revitalizing an existing handbell program?
- Resurrecting a dormant ringing ministry?
- Looking for more focus for your ringers and your program?

Take a few minutes to think, dream, and verbalize where you are, where you are going, and how you would like to get there.

## A Handbell Ministry – What Does this Mean?

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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.

Handbell ringing can bring together, in a unique way, people of all ages, experiences, backgrounds, and interests into one cohesive, musical ensemble. Ringing provides an outlet and a common ground for people who otherwise would not have anything to bring them together. Before you begin developing a ringing ministry/program for your organization, you must first consider what you will be doing, who will participate, what your message will be, and what you hope to accomplish through this wonderful, exciting, wacky, and versatile life of a handbell ministry.

## **Where are you going?**

*"You've got to be careful if you don't know where you're going 'cause you might not get there!" – Yogi Berra, MLB Hall of Fame player.*

If you are to lead others, I hope you have already asked yourself, "Where are we going?" Otherwise, like Yogi says, you might not get there. This resource is intended to take you step-by-step through a thought and planning process that will help give shape to your program and identify who you are and where you are going.

Ideally, all who will be involved in leadership will come together, focus, and envision what you hope to achieve, experience, and share through a handbell ministry. The personnel included will vary for each of us, but it might include a minister, handbell director, music director, worship committee chair, or volunteers leading various age groups. Or YOU may be the sole person to make decisions about your ministry and its role in your organization. Regardless of how many are present, these questions are intended to give thought and direction to your planning for the season and for the future of your ministry.

## **What will we be doing?**

Define your place in ministry. How will a handbell ministry "fit," or how could it fit, into what is already in place? Will your program supplement a fledgling program by bringing new energy to a youth or vocal ministry? Will a handbell ministry provide an outlet for energy that is already there but in need of an outlet?

Knowing and discussing with other leaders in your church the role a handbell ministry can play in the "big picture" will get you off to a good start by defining your focus, garnering much-needed support from other programs staff/leadership, and hopefully avoiding misunderstandings about who, what, and why. Become a part of the "team" from the start!

1. What do you see as the role of your handbell ministry in your church?

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How will your program support other programs in the church? How can other programs support your ministry? Spend some time visiting other leaders and understanding what they are doing, and they will be eager to listen and to support your program. We are all in ministry together!

Food for thought: You may be participating in worship, providing community outreach, supplementing other current church programs, serving as an entry point for potential members, providing music education, serving as a mission project, putting the church's mission into action in a unique way, etc.

### **Who will participate?**

2. What are your targeted groups? Will members be recruited from inside the church and/or outside the church in the community? A church school? From other music programs, like vocal ensembles or instrumental groups?

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Who would you like to have involved? Who is available and in need of the opportunities ringing offers? Is there an age group you would like to attract to your church? This can vary from elementary ages through senior adults and might even include persons with disabilities.

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Which persons of your church can accomplish the purposes of your ministry? For example, if you envision a traveling choir that provides music to senior citizen groups or the homeless, then you will need to attract adults who have a schedule flexible enough to meet these goals.

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### **What are your membership requirements?**

Every group has some, even if they are not stated out loud. Voicing any requirements for membership in your bells choirs, even if very basic, will send the message that the group has value and deserves respect by those within the group and outside the group. Age, church member or visitor, experience, attendance, uniforms, dues/fees, performance schedules, behavior, physical/mental requirement—you decide what is important or necessary. Can you accommodate someone with special needs? Someone who can't stand for an hour, or hear well, or see well? How inclusive can you be, or do you wish to be if up to you—there's no right answer. But think about it now, before the question arises, so that you are aware of what you are able to offer potential ringers. Last, be sure you communicate these to anyone who may be interested in joining you.

Your requirements may be simple; for example, here are mine:

- A willingness to serve by attending weekly rehearsals and making them a priority in the schedule
- The ability to read some music (or not!)
- A willingness to learn a new skill
- Anyone is welcome—visitor or member

3. List your ringer membership requirements:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

## Defining Our Message

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As a faith-based organization, we are rightly held to a higher standard of purpose than other organizations that may exist for the pure fun and enjoyment of ringing.

### What is Our Message?

Keep in mind that your message is similar to a brand; it is the way in which others will perceive your ministry. You may choose to reflect the purpose and message of your church or to focus on one aspect of its message. Your handbell ministry may have a purpose and message, but if you don't define it and share it, you run the risk of saying nothing at all. Music is enjoyable to play and to hear, but if you desire to do MORE, then you need to be intentional about what it is you desire to accomplish.

For example, my church has a mission statement: "Offering hope through Jesus Christ and transforming lives through the power of the Holy Spirit." We often shorten this to "Offering Hope, Transforming Lives" and it infuses all of our programming and direction for us. We have made the church's mission our own in two ways. First, our logo (left) reflects the colors of the church's mission logo.

And, going one step further, we have chosen "Ring Out Loud" as our



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Offering HOPE~Transforming LIVES





message, to serve as a reminder that we must be bold and deliberate about sharing our message of hope and transformation. This began as a youth t-shirt design, which all the ringers claimed and which has become our main logo.

On the other hand, you may want a unique or specialized message for your ministry. This could be as simple as "Ringing to the Glory of God." Find yours and claim it! The more you use it and verbalize it, the more you will "become" your message in others' eyes as well as your own.

4. Our handbell ministry message (The reason why we ring) is:

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6. What would you like to accomplish in your coming season of handbell ministry?

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7. What do you envision your ringers receiving from their participation?

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Think about these: How much time do you expect members to give to your ministry per week? Per season? Special events? Fundraising? Concerts? Non-ringing tasks? Strive for a balance of meaningful and varied experiences with an eye toward what you are asking of your ringers in terms of time and money. Striking a balance is important, so ringers have opportunities to give and to receive without demanding too much of their time or resources.

8. What do you hope they will experience by ringing and in the music you will choose?

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Here's my answer: My hope is that our handbell music will allow ringers to experience "Hope and Transformation" personally through the language of music, as well as the pride and satisfaction of a job well done as part of a musical team.

9. What is it you hope that the listeners (congregation/concert audience) will receive or leave with after your performances and interaction with your choir?

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My answer will sound familiar to you: My hope is that ringers will believe that the music they present in worship offers listeners "Hope and Transformation" through the power of the Holy Spirit through our music.

Educating ringers as to the mission/message of your ministry

10. Next, consider some goals for each choir or age group you have. What is the minimum you want your new and/or young ringers to learn? What skill or experience do you want to teach or give to your adults or youth? In other words, what one thing do you want them to take away from their ringing experience?

Group: \_\_\_\_\_

Goals: \_\_\_\_\_

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Group: \_\_\_\_\_

Goals: \_\_\_\_\_

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Group: \_\_\_\_\_

Goals: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

## How do we share our message?

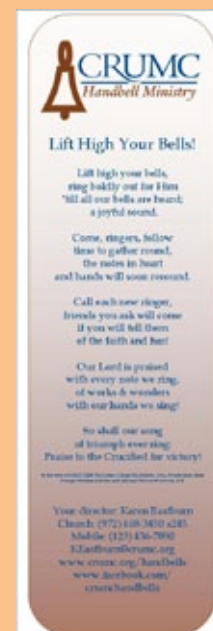
If you have an important message, one that you believe will change lives, do you whisper it to one person at a time, or do you shout it out? Clearly, being assertive in delivering your ministry's message will provide more chances that someone will receive it. For our purposes, we need to begin with the people whose job it is to convey this message—your ringers.

If you are starting anew or would like to begin emphasizing the purpose of your ministry to your ringers, a simple but effective method is to plan weekly devotions that are brief but make the point about what your message is. It doesn't need to be handbell-specific, but it should be on the subject of your ministry's purpose. You can add the handbell-spin yourself based upon your personal knowledge and experience with handbells and ministry.

Postcards you send ringers, your email signature, your handbell web page, Facebook page, shirts, stoles, posters in your rehearsal area, magnets, and buttons are all ways to keep your message in front of your ringers and the community in a fun way.

## Sharing your message...in repertoire

Sharing our message of faith happens in various ways, but the music is where we live and share our faith among each other first, then make



it our own for performance. For this reason, choose your repertoire so that it offers opportunities for your group to grow as musicians, as handbell ringers, as messengers, and as faithful people. How do you do this?

- Choose hymn tunes or praise songs that have special text ringers/listeners can relate to.
- Select music with a scriptural reference—a starting point for devotions or a sharing opportunity in worship.
- Choose repertoire that offers new experiences for your musicians in techniques, rhythms, or musical expression in a way new to them. Moving beyond a musicians “comfort zone” is an experience in ringing beyond ourselves, boldly, and relying on each other to reach the goal of music with a message.

Choosing repertoire allows you to also satisfy your ringers’ needs pertaining to why they ring—to have fun, share music, spread the message, learn teamwork, etc. Think about these needs. For instance, having fun, for some ringers, is equal to lots of techniques or rhythms. For those who value the message, it may be ringing a favorite hymn tune that has special meaning. Getting to know your ringers will give you the insight needed to choose wisely for them.

Aside from the selection of music, your choice of ringers and ringing positions can also be a way you choose to live out your message. Your philosophy of assigning can be a way to “speak” to your ringers about what you believe they can do. If you never challenge your weakest ringer and give him/her the opportunity to grow and improve, that person may feel you don’t believe in their ability to learn or rise to a challenge. But how can a ringer be expected to “Ring Out Loud” if they are given an assignment that is beyond their ability? Likewise, a ringer who is put in a position in which she is ill-prepared will feel inadequate and defeated and may believe she has let the group down. An occasional challenge is good for everyone, but assignments should be made that are within each person’s ability to be successful. Using the “Ring Out Loud” ministry message as an example, a ringer is not likely to ring out

loud (boldly, confidently, strongly) if he is not comfortable or does not have the skills needed to ring the part he is asked to ring.

## **A reminder of why we ring**

A great and obvious option is to create a handbell t-shirt with your message right on it for all to see. Just make sure that it is fun and appealing so your ringers will want to wear it, especially places other than your church. If you have an artistically talented person in your church, take advantage of their skills. Otherwise, it may be worth it to hire someone to do a one-time design that is of the highest quality or your efforts might prove ineffective.

It also makes for a fun uniform for casual concerts and events and creates a team feeling among your ringers. Youth ringers may even wear them in worship when they perform, if appropriate. (Suggestion: find a vendor who can supply separate styles for ladies and men, and your ladies will wear them more because they will fit and flatter.)

You may be thinking, “My ringers know why we are ringing”—but doesn’t everyone need to be reminded now and then? This is especially true on those days when ringers find it a challenge being a handbell choir member, when facing that difficult piece of music, the needy person next to you, a demanding week, or your aching body occasionally make us all wonder, “Is it worth it?” So let’s remind one another that, yes, it is!”

Your rehearsal space is an ideal place to remind your ringers why they are giving time and energy to ringing when they could be doing something else. Posters, pictures, a bulletin board, a sticker on the ringers’ notebooks, your verse or “logo” on your cases, a sign hanging from or on back of the director’s music stand, etc.—you don’t need to do them all, but pick something that works for your situation and vary it each season.

Other places to include your “logo” or message include your email signature, your church/group/ministry website, or a table or pole ban-



Download a copy of the "Ring Out Joy" poster

ner. Incorporate your message into your concert themes; for example, "Ring Out Loud" at Christmas was "Ring Out Joy," and a pops concert could be "Ring Out Pops."

### **Sharing your message...through performance**

For whom will you ring? Will the performance venues vary by age group? Will all performances be scheduled within the walls of your church? Will ringing be planned within the context of a worship service or for a variety of situations? Some groups need the additional challenge and goal of performances outside of worship, like senior citizens centers, schools, church events, concerts, festivals, other churches, etc.

How often will your groups perform? This is important, because if you perform too often, they will not be prepared to deliver the musical message with a sense of accomplishment, but if you perform too infrequently, they will not experience enough feedback to feel purposeful. Handbell directors often do not have the luxury of determining their performance schedule, so often we must find a way to adapt. Perhaps you will pick music with more challenges for infrequent performances or find other venues for performance outside worship to keep the energy going from audience feedback. Performances scheduled frequently might dictate that you have a variety of levels of music, so that ringers are able to learn some quickly and have others in different stages of learning to successfully perform as necessary.

#### **Logistical considerations**

"Fitting in" with your church's services and environment are a primary consideration if you are to communicate with your congregation effectively. The message you hope to convey with your music may be obscured if the congregation is more focused on where your tables are, how and when you are moving, your warm up, or any aspect of your participation in worship.

How does your ensemble physically fit into your worship space and

setting? Do you have adequate space, or is it a compromise? Do people have to walk around your tables, or even have their regular passageway blocked? Although this may be a “field condition” of our situation, be aware that, for some, this creates a negative before you’ve even rung your first note. Try to be creative in how you might swing a negative into being a positive.

Blocking an aisle? Call it a “bridge to music ministry,” talk it up any way possible, put notes in the newsletter, church blog, etc., and make a sign that says something like: “Thank you! Your steps around our tables today allow us to offer our music in worship.” By involving others in your ministry, they may feel like a partner with you. Don’t forget to come early and stay late for worship and meet-and-greet folks to build more bridges by sharing what your group’s goals and activities are.

In sports, players must accept certain aspects of the playing field—wind, rain, heat, or cold—as part of the game. In handbell ministry, we are sometimes faced with space or other logistics that are beyond our control, which are also “field conditions.” What to do?

- Communicate, communicate, communicate!
- Ask questions
- Recruit an ally
- Wear your flexible shoes

Try to be accommodating when you can; it is appreciated. However, being flexible doesn’t mean bending so much that your ringers cannot feel good about what they are doing or that your ensemble’s music is compromised.

- Use the “challenge” as a way to be creative

If you know that a particular worship theme is in the future, and you have a creative way to “fit in,” suggest this early in the planning. Becoming a part of the planning process may allow you to have some control over the logistics of the service in relation to your ensemble.

## **Space**

No space for tables? Choose music with no bell changes or recruit extra ringers for those “extra bells.” Use music stands, and you can play virtually anywhere in the space.

Ringers are capable of handling changes in their regular setup if they can be prepared ahead of time. Rehearsing in any alternate setup is absolutely crucial to your ringers’ feelings of comfort and preparedness. One of the great qualities of handbells is their versatility—you might even find a new set up that you prefer.

Accentuate the positive! Your ringers will embrace any change more successfully if their leader has a good attitude about the situation. If you can’t change it, embrace it the best you can, or decide not to perform.

## **Holidays**

Your message might also lend itself to expressing a particular holiday sentiment. Just as our Christmas concert was called “Ring Out Joy” to add an appropriate dimension to our message for the holiday, Easter could be “Ring Out He’s Risen!,” and so on.

## **Communion**

Communion or other special services may require moving your choir setup to a alternate area to perform. Choosing repertoire becomes important if your ringers’ sightline to the director will be compromised. Avoid music with difficult transitions, rubato sections, or extreme tempos (fast or slow).

## **Musicians are generous people**

Sometimes the musicians we have in our choirs are also the musicians who give their time to vocal choirs, instrumental groups, serving communion, and more. And, if you’re lucky, you may even have a liturgist or pastor who rings with your choir. Participants moving about to do various things during worship can be distracting or awkward. It is paramount that the movement from one element of worship to another be thought through in detail and, if possible, rehearsed. Don’t



underestimate the amount of anxiety that may come from not knowing where and when to move. Avoid putting your ringers in this situation if at all possible.

## **Sharing your message ...with one another**

Your mission most likely involves a big emphasis on reaching OUT, and moves in not only an outward direction from your choir but also an inward one. The way in which ringers interact with one another and with the director is often the most significant opportunity for living your message in a personal way. Dealing with personalities, conflicts, and pastoral needs is the real heart of the ministry we do. But, there should also be planned times for socializing and relationship-building between all members of the choir. The people in your bell choir are often people you would never meet otherwise, and this is a wonderful gift.

### **Consider these situations and your response to this as a group:**

- Times for fellowship – both planned and spontaneous
- Sharing time – weekly joys/concerns/what's new/prayer requests
- Devotions – director led or ringer led
- Illnesses/deaths/weddings/new babies/life events

### **Interactions with other programs of the church**

- Do you share space?
- Do you compete with other groups/meetings/activities at the same time?
- Are you recruiting for the same people to ring as other programs of the church?
- Are there limited music funds that you are sharing among all music programs?

All these situations can be points of conflict among the bell choir ringers and leadership and others in the church so they must be handled in a Christian manner.

We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your[a] faith; if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.

This is just a reminder that sometimes the most difficult place to stay focused on our mission and purpose is in our dealings with our church family.

As members of a group with a special mission emphasis, we have an obligation to discuss our expectations concerning our members' participation. Consider that an ensemble without the structure concerning members' commitment and attendance will not achieve their mission or goals, let alone create meaningful music. Have a firm idea of what you expect, and discuss these topics with your ensemble in order to set policies for the group:

- Expectations for participation
- Absences, anticipated and unexpected
- Substitute policies
- Group tasks, e.g., set up, clean up, polishing, music, and maintenance

Sharing our message...through mission projects

Musical ensembles with a faith-based purpose can do even more than make music. Working together, we can accomplish more than when we are alone. You may consider bringing your ensemble together to do a non-musical mission project. This kind of activity will give your ringers a chance to collaborate, be generous, look beyond themselves, and make a significant contribution for others. It's also a wonderful way to partner with other ministries of your church. These ideas have been successful:

- Make a collection for a community program, such as a food pantry, for disadvantaged children, for victims of di-

## 2011 Mission Project

### Joyful Noise Class

- This year our mission project and fundraiser will support the joyful noise class. We will give them a new and better musical experience for playing and singing. The instruments they have now are very old tone chimes in poor condition and we believe they should have quality instruments.



#### Looking ahead to our fundraiser plans:

As part of the Journey Sunday School program, the Joyful Noise Room provides a place for children to experience God's word through music. Eight years ago when Journey began the Chancel Choir sponsored the start up of this class and provided most of the instruments but little has been updated since then.

Our goal is to provide a 2 octave set of Chanceltones for this classroom to be used for Journey. The children began using borrowed Chanceltones this summer from the Handbell Ministry and they have been a big hit!

The cost is \$1,100 for the chimes, case and small pads to rest them on for each child.



sasters...the possibilities are endless! Maybe you can find a cause that fits in with your mission or purpose?

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- Create a Project – Donate musical instruments or handchimes to a deserving group within/outside your church, or pool your manpower together and have a “work day” at church to clean or do some other needed project. For example, last year our annual cookie dough sale raised funds for a set of handchimes for our elementary Sunday school classes.
- Make a Meal – Provide a potluck meal for someone: the unemployed of your church/community, single parents, elderly, youth, etc.
- Ringer Random Acts of Kindnesss - This emphasizes that our actions toward others are the best way we can show Christ’s love. For us, it was part of our church “Mission Blitz” project where all members are asked to pledge to be active in the community in a service project. I made a bulletin board and ringers wrote down simple acts of kindness they did that show Christ’s love.



**Ringers Random Acts of Kindness**

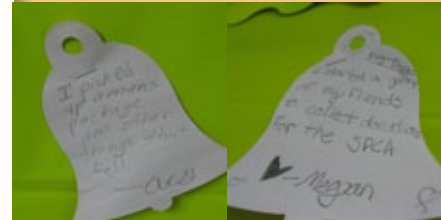
*Directions Information—Please plan to take about 2-3 minutes at rehearsals through May 31. Beginning April 22 we can have ringers wear their actions on white-out bells and put on the Bulletin Board at the July 2nd.*

*Your enthusiasm and suggestions will be key to our success in achieving our goals this month. It would be great if you could take about the sound effects (whistles) that travel fast one bell and spread out over the entire room. Our simple acts of kindness can have the same effect of spreading from the one person we help to others.*

**Join for Random Acts of Kindness or get ideas going—**

1. Opening the door and getting a change at the grocery store, work, etc. . .
2. Leaving flowers or a card on someone's doorstep that needs cheering up
3. Doing a chore or job for someone so they don't have to do it
4. Sample your neighbors' animals for them
5. Put all the newspapers on your street next to everyone's front door with a note saying "Have a nice day!"
6. Anything that would be helpful or spread cheer to another person.

Thank you for your time and effort to make our participation in MISSION BLITZ a SUCCESS! Let me know if you need anything from me- Karen



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a resource for members of  
**Handbell Musicians**  
O F A M E R I C A

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