

SINGING OUR PRAISES

CALLUM TEMPEST

Callum Tempest, recent graduate of the Leeds RC Diocese Schools Singing Programme, explores how the Church's mission of outreach can be carried out and expressed through a choir.

The Church has an obligation to sustain a programme of outreach, for the dimension of church life that relates to action is essential to its survival. The word 'outreach' must be used with care to avoid sounding patronizing; nor should it be confused with evangelism. While evangelism is specifically the spreading of the gospel, the concept of outreach is literally one of 'reaching out', in the hope that acts of love which emulate those of Christ will encourage a connection between the community and the Church. It is then hoped that such a connection will draw participants into Christian fellowship and show them the way of Christ.

Music has a long-standing tradition within the Church. St Paul writes to the Ephesians of 'singing and making music with all your heart' with 'psalms, hymns and spiritual songs.' From the third century, simple chanting of the monastic Daily Office and the later Gregorian chant, still popular in contemporary worship as it has been in religious orders for over a millennium, has been at the heart of the liturgy. In fact, advancements in musical or vocal techniques and styles were largely due to religious influences, such as Rome's *Schola Cantorum* of boys and men and – much later – the Protestant Reformation widening the provision of music in churches to include congregations and mixed choirs. Britain especially has a very rich history of choral music in its numerous cathedrals and parish churches, and this may be seen as an exemplary form of outreach from a number of different perspectives.

It is obvious that participation in a good church choir is beneficial to any musician. The skills learnt include vital components of musicianship: reading music, vocal skills and an awareness of ensemble. However, besides the rich musical education a church choir can provide, there are many other areas that are touched upon throughout weekly rehearsals and services. Singing at regular liturgies will expose a participant to the

messages of the gospel, and the nature of the repertoire offers a grounding in Christian doctrines and teaching. Important social skills are also nurtured, with choristers learning and experiencing collaboration, leadership, and significant pastoral skills from an early age.

St Wulfram's Church, Grantham has 58 members across their boys', girls' and teenage youth choirs. Through membership of the choirs, many families have become involved in church life, particularly in community activities. The importance of choral music in a programme of outreach becomes clear when it is realized very few of these people would have significant contact with the Church without the choir. Director of Music, Dr Tim Williams, is eager to emphasize the excellent model of outreach that choral music offers in the 21st century. He notes that a church choir can give access to 'a tradition and heritage of sacred choral music, a strong experience of community, and working as part of a team with common objectives, all within the context of Christian worship and church life.'

When we think of sacred music, we often think of young, angelic trebles in a vast cathedral scenario, but this need not be the case. St Andrew's Church, Heckington has previously enjoyed a strong choral tradition; however this had long been extinct until, in early 2012, the St Andrew's Singers were formed to lead the singing in this incredibly large building and acoustic. Beginning with hymns, but now progressing to responsorial psalms and more complex and challenging anthems, the 18-strong adult choir offers members the chance to explore their skills and talents, which in many similarly remote villages might not be possible.



St Andrew's Singers, Heckington, pictured in Ratcliffe College Chapel



The St Andrew's Singers are eager that their choir remains inclusive, not exclusive. The only requirement for membership is simply a commitment to regular attendance at rehearsals and services. John Lyon, who directs the group, believes it is his responsibility to 'train and shape the people we have, regardless of the starting point' and that singing in the choir has brought a number of members back into the Church (in this case, the musical outreach has also fulfilled an evangelistic purpose). He also highlights the supportive and caring environment that a church choir can offer, drawing on the example of one singer who has been living with a family member suffering from a long-term illness. Not only have the social aspects of the choir provided sturdy support for that singer, but the positive effects of the order which regular commitment to rehearsals has brought into an otherwise turbulent life are remarkable.

Cathedral choirs are the 'crème de la crème' of religious choral music, representing the highest standards, and often of international renown. This fame can, to an extent, perform the function of another method of outreach. While its primary purpose in the liturgy is to enhance worship, music of the highest quality will often draw people in, regardless of faith or belief. In his *Ode on St Cecilia's Day*, the poet Alexander Pope criticized those 'who to Church repair not for the doctrine, but the music there' – yet those who come for music within liturgy are subsequently exposed to doctrine. Engaging in and with worship, they can experience the Word of God through preaching. In the special atmosphere of a church they can feel to be with God in the most sacred of spaces and may hear that 'still small voice of calm'. They may be encouraged to explore their faith further, and have access to spiritual guidance from a minister. In this sense, choral music quite clearly embraces outreach – and to great success.

The Diocese of Leeds operates the largest programme of religious choral music in the country, involving nearly three thousand children every week in activities from singing workshops in primary schools to a fully-fledged cathedral choir at Leeds Cathedral. The Schools Singing Programme operates in 43 of the diocese's Catholic schools, and involves weekly singing rehearsals with experienced choral directors. From the school groups, the choral directors recruit members for regional choirs in Leeds, Bradford and Huddersfield, which also rehearse regularly and sing at weekly services in churches across the diocese. I myself have benefited enormously from the programme over the many years I have been involved with it. Auditioning to join the Cathedral Boys' Choir at the age of ten, I have since progressed through the semi-professional adult choir and now hold the organ scholarship at Leeds Cathedral.

The most significant part of the Leeds model is the sheer volume of children and young people it incorporates. It encourages the development of strong interpersonal skills, reduces isolation and loneliness, and involves some of the region's most disadvantaged children. Working closely with schools across this large and diverse diocese gives the Church a tangible presence in the local communities, and offers the support without which many teachers responsible for delivering music in schools can feel lost. These truly represent a 'reaching out', demonstrating the love of Christ from day to day, and offering many opportunities for public benefit. The programme also offers an exploration of faith unlike any other, and my own experience is a testament to this. For example, I have found the singing of Latin texts to the masterful melodies of Renaissance polyphony provides something especially transcendent for both the performer and listener alike, especially in the glorious acoustic of a cathedral.

While outreach can be delivered in a multitude of ways, no method has quite such a wide impact as that of music. A programme of choral music offers an enriching experience for an individual; but a model which incorporates a vision where all can enjoy the sanctity of music can provide a foundation in faith for a great many more. As Shakespeare once wrote: 'If music be the food of love, play on,' – so play on and sing on indeed, as an open invitation to all to share the Lord's table and partake of his celestial food.

