

20 Hand Signals for Choir Directing (and how to use them)

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When you're conducting a choir performance, the main way you communicate with the choir is with your hands. Effective use of hand signals is a vital skill for any choir director.

The information in this booklet is also available online. The online version includes videos that demonstrate the hand gestures. Here's the link: [20 Hand Signals for Choir Directing \(and how to use them\)](#).

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Here are some of the things you communicate with hand signals while directing a choir

Since gospel choirs don't sing from sheet music, they don't always sing a song exactly the same way every time. They may do a different number of repeats, or do the parts of the song in a different order from one performance to another. Because of this, the director's hand signals are important for telling:

- Which passage in the song the choir is about to sing (the verse, chorus, bridge, etc.)
- Which section of the choir should sing right now (sopranos, altos, tenors, or basses)
- When you want to end a particular passage
- When you want them to repeat something

Hand signals can also remind the choir of things they already learned in rehearsal, but it doesn't hurt to refresh their memories. Things like:

- What words are coming up next
- The shape of the melody they're singing
- When to sing unison and when to sing in harmony

With hand signals, your timing is important!

Any signals you give to your choir should be given with plenty of advance time. Signal the next passage of the song, the key change, the ending, several beats before it's actually going to happen. Everyone will know to keep on singing whatever they're on right now, but they will be ready for what's coming next.

A good choir director needs to be thinking **a little bit ahead** of the singers and the musicians to keep everything going smoothly.

Practice makes perfect!

You know what? When I was younger and just getting into choir directing, I spent hours of time by myself doing "thin-air conducting". I would listen to my choir recordings and practice doing all the hand motions, just the way I would if I were really in front of a choir. I recommend it highly!

Showing the choir which portion of the song you want them to sing next

The first level of signals you'll give to your choir are the ones telling them which passage of the song they are about to sing (the verse, chorus, bridge, vamp, etc.):

- 1:** For the "top" or opening section of the song -- Pat the top of your head, or your forehead.
- 2:** For a lead verse -- Point at the lead singer. If there are two or more verses, point to the lead singer first, then hold a number to indicate which verse you want them to sing.
- 3:** For a chorus -- Form a letter "C" with your hand.
- 4:** For the bridge (the middle section of the song) -- I form something that looks like a letter "T" with my two hands. It reminds me of a bridge.
- 5:** For the vamp (repeating chorus) -- Hold up your hand with your fingers crossed.
- 6:** For the end of the song (or the end of a certain passage) -- Hold up a closed fist.

I recommend that you *don't use any gestures that look like numbers* unless you're really signaling a number. For instance, I don't use a "V" for "verse" because the choir might think I'm signaling the number two.

Hand signals for more details in the song sequence

The next level of signals deals with the smaller details that happen within one section of the song, like little repeats and things like that. Some gestures you can use for giving those details are:

- 7:** For repeats -- Cycle your hands around each other like a wheel turning.
- 8:** To come out of a section after you've been repeating -- Point behind you (over your shoulders) with your thumbs.
- 9:** Counting down to come out of a repeating section -- Indicate the numbers with your fingers and count down . . . 4 . . . 3 . . . 2 . . . 1 . . .
- 10:** When you want the choir to be silent -- Hold your closed fists tight against your chest. You can also lower your head slightly.
- 11:** To repeat just the final line of a song (this is a common way to end songs; it's called a deceptive cadence) -- This is a sign that I made up. I form an "L" with the thumb and index finger of one hand, then with my other hand do a circular motion around it (like a "repeat" signal).

Hand signals that tell the choir HOW to sing a passage

These are signals for taking the choir through key changes, inversions, changes in volume, and giving other guidance:

- 12:** "Sing quietly" -- Use hand motions that are close to your body and keep them small.

13: "Sing loudly" -- Use broad gestures, open your arms out wide.

14: If you only want one section of the choir to sing -- Point at that one section, just like you would point at a lead singer.

15: Unison vs. Harmony -- If the choir has been singing in unison and it's time to switch to 3-part harmony, hold out three fingers on your hands, with the fingers pointing toward the choir, and extend your hands out to the sides a little bit.

16: Modulation (key change) -- Motion "up" with your index finger.

17: Inversion -- Form "L" shapes with both hands, with your thumbs pointing toward each other. Then, with a slight upward movement, flip your hands so that your thumbs are pointing toward the ceiling.

18: If one section of the choir isn't singing loud enough -- Point to that section, then point to your ear.

Hand signals that help put the polish on the choir's performance

One of the things a choir director wants is for the choir to sing with precision, and there are some signals you can give with your hands that will help bring that about:

19: Sometimes when I'm directing I'll use hand movements to follow the shape of the melody the choir is singing (moving my hand(s) up when the notes goes up and down when the notes go down). This reminds the choir of how the melody goes, but more importantly (I think), it keeps everyone in sync with each other. Your hand motions can be a visual guide that keeps everyone on the rhythm of the song together.

20: Another way to make the choir's singing more precise is to make sure that everyone begins and ends their notes at the same time. On a long note, keep your hand(s) open for as long as the note is being sustained, and then close your hand(s) when the note should be ending.

The most important thing is for you and your choir to understand each other

You don't necessarily have to use the same signals that I've used on this page. What matters most is that the choir you work with understands whatever signals you use and is able to go wherever you're trying to take them.

God bless you in your choir ministry!