

A Guide to Directing a Gospel Choir

By Joan Hall

Publication date: 09/03/11

How to be a great gospel choir director



These are my best ideas and tips for working with the gospel choir: how to select songs, teach the choir, work with musicians, conduct the choir, flow with a service, and do all the other things that a church choir director wants to do with excellence!

There's lots of information on the internet about choir directing, but most of it is geared toward the standard, sheet-music-reading type of choir. Those of us who direct gospel choirs know that it takes a different approach to teach and lead our choirs. So let's take a look at what works best for teaching gospel choir singing.

The contents of this book are also available online (for free). Here's the link: [A Guide to Directing a Gospel Choir](#)

Topics covered

1. [Any gospel choir, large or small, can be good at what they do](#)
2. [Every choir director should STUDY their choir members](#)
3. [To teach music, you have to know music!](#)
4. [Choosing choir songs with the right message](#)
5. [Have variety in your church choir music repertoire](#)
6. [When you teach a song, it's YOURS](#)
7. [Teaching songs to your choir: Repetition is the key](#)
8. [Conducting tips for a gospel choir](#)

Any gospel choir, large or small, can be good at what they do.

Most of us don't direct mega-choirs

I love hearing big choirs made up of super-talented folks. They can perform any type of music and uplift their listeners.

But most of us choir directors don't work with that kind of massive choir. We have our own little choirs at our little churches. The singers and musicians vary in their musical skills. But we can still do a great job and be a blessing to whatever services we're a part of.

I sometimes direct mass choirs that include several churches, but my home church choir has 12 active members. Some Sundays we've sung with as few as 5 people. My aspiration is to use whatever knowledge I have to make our little choir a GREAT little choir. Even if God only gives us 2 talents, we can be profitable with those.



Every choir director should STUDY their choir members

"Know them which labour among you" (I Thessalonians 5:12)

Your choir sound is going to be its best if the music works with your choir's best abilities and talents. Get to know their strengths and weaknesses.

What vocal ranges do the singers have? Listen to how high and low they can go before they start cracking or sounding strained. Are they able to do a song where the tenors have to sing an A-flat, or will you need to change the key? (There is no law that says every choir has to do a song in the same key that the original artist did.)

How well do they harmonize? Try introducing something with complicated harmonies and see how it goes. If it doesn't go, stick with basic harmonies until they get more experience. If they're only ready to sing in unison, that can be a beautiful thing if the director picks the right kind of songs. For more suggestion on how to choose music for an inexperienced choir, you can check out my web page on [working with a choir of beginners](#).

Know your musicians as well, of course. A song can sound really clumsy if it's too complex for your keyboard player to play or it has a beat or a tempo that your drummer isn't comfortable with.

A great performance is an interaction between the song and the performing artists. You, the choir director, are the matchmaker who brings those elements together. The more you know about each one, the better it will work.



To teach music, you have to know music!

"Study to show thyself approved" (II Timothy 2:15)

If you're going to teach music to others, you need to understand how music works. Get familiar with the basics of music theory -- scales and keys, chords and harmony. There are lots of books and websites that can help you get into these concepts if you're not familiar with them. I have a few listed on this page.

Once you decide on a song that you're going to teach, get to know that song backward and forward. Know what key you're doing it in. Learn each part (soprano, alto, tenor) until you have them memorized and you can sing each one yourself. It may take some time and practice to learn how to pick out song parts from a recording, but it's worth the effort. There have been times when I listened to one line of a song over and over for 10 minutes until I was sure that I was hearing each part correctly and could sing each one from memory. Study the song until every aspect of it is a part of you.

When rehearsal time comes, you will be ready and confident, and your choir will have confidence in you that you know what direction you're taking them.

A useful resource for teaching choir parts

ChoirParts.com – This is my own site where you can purchase practice tracks for your choir members. The individual parts (Soprano, Alto, Tenor and/or Bass) are separated out so you can listen to one part by itself. This helps your choir members memorize their parts.



Choosing choir songs with the right message

"A word fitly spoken" (Proverbs 25:11)

As a church choir director, the songs you perform in a service are your opportunity to bring a message to those who have come to fellowship. The songs are your sermon. What should you preach? You know lots of songs that are meaningful and blessed. Which songs will be best for which types of performances? Take time to contemplate the setting where you will be singing and choose songs that are a good fit for the service.

For one thing, consider the occasion. Obviously on holidays like [Easter](#), [Christmas](#), Thanksgiving, or [Pentecost](#), people expect songs that speak to that subject. For other events, consider what will be a good message to convey. In your main weekly services, you will bring songs that cover a wide range of ideas from praise and worship to admonition, invitation, encouragement, and much more. For conventions, anniversary services, and other such events, look for music that echoes the theme of the service or the reason the congregation has for coming together.

Also consider who your audience is. If you're going to be singing to a crowd with a lot of people who are not regular church-goers, don't sing songs that they can't relate to. For example, someone who hasn't read the Bible will have no idea what you mean when you sing, "Ain't no rock gonna take my place." You can convey the same message other songs that will be more understandable, like "Let

everything that hath breath praise the Lord." (Many years ago, I heard a group sing a song where they just repeated over and over -- "Throw me overboard, I've got a hiding place." I was completely confused by the song until years later when I finally found out that it was derived from the story of Jonah.)

Different audiences are also accustomed to different styles of music. Even if the message of a song is beautiful and appropriate, a song with lots of "thee" and "thou" in it might be hard for young people to decode, while rap lyrics might go by too fast for older people to keep up and understand what's being said.

Music that reaches out to the listeners and works in harmony with a service can be an instrument of God to bring deliverance to those who experience it. Pray for guidance as you bring the Word in song to those whom God has put before you.



Have variety in your church choir music repertoire

"Treasures old and new"

Therefore every scribe which is instructed unto the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is an householder, which bringeth forth out of his treasure things new and old. -- Matthew 13:52

This is one of my favorite theme scriptures as a choir director. It's very important to me to have variety in our choir repertoire. Every style of music has a unique quality that it brings to the hearers.

Some musicians seem to have the idea that only contemporary gospel music is attractive. Others think that only old music is truly spiritual. Don't let your choir members fall into either of those traps! Teach them how to appreciate all different styles of gospel music. Bring them musical treasures of all kinds, both old and new. As they study the music, they will grow to understand it and love it. You are the shepherd of your choir. If you nurture in them a love for all kinds of music, they will be better musicians and better ministers to God's people.



When you teach a song, it's YOURS

Songwriters are not God . . .

and their words and music don't have to be treated like they're scripture carved in stone. If there's a portion of a song that you don't care for, change it! Maybe the message of the song is great, but there's just a couple of lines that are off base. Or maybe there's a musical line that you think will sound better a different way. Rearrange it! Bring your vision and your interpretation to the song.

Your choir members need to understand that sometimes they will be doing a unique interpretation of a song. Make sure they understand that singing a song differently than the way it is on the record does not mean that the choir is "singing it wrong".



Teaching songs to your choir: Repetition is the key

Drill, baby, drill!

I've got a page that's covers the fundamentals of song teaching in depth. You can find it here -- [How to teach a choir song: The basics.](#)

But here's an overview.

As we all know, gospel choirs usually don't use sheet music. We sing by ear, by heart. That means that everything we sing has to be memorized. I've had the experience of being in a choir rehearsal, learning a new song, and forgetting all of it a couple hours after the rehearsal is over. When it was time to perform, we were stumbling through. How do you prevent that from happening to your choir?

- Drill, drill, DRILL!! When you introduce the song, go over each part several times (you're already prepared because you've got all of the parts memorized, right?). Have them repeat it. And repeat it. And repeat it until you know they've got it.
- Practice the song at more than one rehearsal. I find that choirs remember music MUCH better if they are able to rehearse on more than one occasion. Two rehearsals are pretty good, three or more are great. If you have only had one, you're gambling.
- For more complex music, give them something to take home. I find it extremely valuable to make practice CDs for choirs. I don't mean burning copies of the original recording (which is against the law anyway). Your choir can really benefit from hearing their own individual part and singing along to it. You can buy home recording software that doesn't cost very much. Record yourself singing each part and make CDs for the choir members to use for practicing on their own time (I've got step-by-step instructions on my [practice CD page](#)). This gives them another way to drill, drill, drill those parts.

Every time we repeat something, it makes another groove in the brain. With enough repetition, you can be confident that when performance time comes, your choir will be "in the groove".



Conducting tips for a gospel choir

All the preparation, planning and teaching that a director has done come together when it's time for the choir to stand and sing. Good conducting techniques are the final skill in the choir director's skill set.

Conducting a gospel choir is different from conducting classically-trained choirs. With gospel choir, the director usually doesn't use the standard beat patterns, but instead uses gestures that follow the rhythm of the tune the choir is singing. Signals are used to let the choir know what passage of the song is going to be sung next and to give direction about volume, expression, and other elements of the performance.

One thing that's very important when conducting your choir is to give them plenty of advance notice about any changes that are coming. For example, don't wait until the first note of the chorus to signal that you're going to the chorus; signal this several beats ahead of time. The choir will know to finish out what they're singing right now, and they'll also know what's coming next. The same thing with key changes, endings, and any other movement in the song -- give the signal in advance so that everyone has time to get ready.

Be sure that your choir is familiar with the hand signals you use and knows what those signals mean. If you already have established signals that work well for you and your choir, it doesn't really matter if they're the same as someone else's. My web page about [hand signals for choir directing](#) illustrates some of the signals I find useful. Check them out if you like.



Best wishes in your choir directing journey!

God Bless!