

# 3 Reasons Church Choirs Are Dying

James Merritt spent years as senior pastor of an Atlanta-area megachurch that featured a mighty choir.

Then he changed his tune.

At 50, he left First Baptist Church Snellville to plant a new church—200 people in a rented space at a high school 12 miles away—focused on reaching a young generation.

There was and is no choir. And that puts Merritt's current congregation, Cross Pointe Church, right on trend.

The newly released National Congregations Study finds church choirs are on the downbeat in white Protestant churches across the theological spectrum.

Choirs stand strong in black Protestant congregations, where 90 percent of regular attendees say there's a choir at the main service. The same is true for three in four (76 percent) **Catholic** worshippers.

But among white conservative **evangelicals**, only 40 percent of worshippers say they hear a choir at services, down from 63 percent 14 years ago.

For those who attend liberal or moderate **Protestant** congregations, there's a similar slide to 50 percent in 2012, down from 78 percent in 1998.

Sales for the music for choral anthems, slipped so deeply four years ago that the United Methodist Church's publishing arm, Abingdon Press, stopped buying new anthem music, said Mary Catherine Dean, associate publisher.

Merritt, a former president of the Southern Baptist

Convention, is quick to say, "I'm not knocking choirs."

A lot of thought went into eliminating the choir at Cross Pointe.

"Practically, if a choir is going to be top shelf, people have to come at least one night a week and rehearse at least two hours. Then, a top-shelf choir is going to want to sing every service and do Christmas cantatas and special events," said Merritt.

"That takes staff, an orchestra, a big enough stage. That costs money. When we were starting up in 2003, we decided we would be better stewards not to invest in that."

Philosophically, said Merritt, "We saw where the culture was headed. The younger generation doesn't gravitate toward choirs."

Today, Cross Pointe, with nearly 2,800 people in weekend worship, is "a very contemporary, very band-driven church," serving a multi-ethnic, multi-generational congregation at two campuses.

Merritt's reasoning mirrors that of experts who see choirs shrinking, if not falling silent.

### **People are reluctant to perform.**

Mary Preus, choir director at Our Saviour's Lutheran Church in Minneapolis, blames "our culture of performance and expertise. We don't sing anywhere else in our lives the way we once did. I grew up singing in home, in school and church every week. Now, people think they are not good enough to sing," she said.

### **People move.**

Alan Purdum, minister of music for Howland Community Church near Youngstown, Ohio, said, "Our choir survives

because some of my friends and my wife are in it.” On Sunday mornings, eight to 12 people and a hired soprano sing for about 80 people at services where, 40 years ago, a choir of 30 voices sang to hundreds in the pews.

### **The recession was a blow.**

“Music is an area that can be cut when dollars are scarce in the (offering) plate,” painful as that may be, said Terre Johnson, national chairman for music in worship for the American Choral Directors Association.

Thirteen years ago, when Joey Lott became director of worship arts for Maples Memorial United Methodist Church in Olive Branch, Miss., there were 55 voices in the choir. “In 2008 when the recession hit, I lost 15 members of my choir in six months. They had to move elsewhere for work. That started the descent. From there, I am now down to about 25 people,” Lott said.

Yet choir leaders adapt and sing.

Preus has spent decades working to “revive the joy of singing” at Our Saviour’s. She does it with creative choices for music and staging. Choir members don’t sit or stand in a special spot. They don’t wear special clothes or robes, said Preus. “They just stand up wherever they are in the pews and sing.”

And because traditional choral music can be challenging for even the most talented of singers, she takes time to hunt down more accessible music, often drawing on music from Africa and Latin America.

Don’t count choirs out, said Eileen Guenther, professor of church music at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington and former president of the American Guild of Organists.

“Churches are struggling to find the style that is most engaging. But there’s a reason choral music is called

‘traditional.’ It’s been around a while. Contemporary music may not have as much staying power,” Guenther said.

It may be that what is fading away is the “performance choir,” replaced by choirs that lead the whole congregation in song, said Charles Billingsley, worship pastor for Thomas Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Va., and artist in residence at Liberty University.

“We are in the age of church planting, and a lot of these startups are small. But I see even some of these churches will throw up some risers and have 20, 30, 40 people sing,” he said.

Thomas Road, founded by the late Jerry Falwell, has “a loft full of singers, 300 people in the choir. But their main function,” he said is to “be an army of worship voices leading the people of God into the presence of God.”

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