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WHAT TO DO ABOUT THE TEA BREAK

LEADING BLIND AND PARTIALLY SIGHTED PEOPLE IN THE CHOIR

MIKE HOLROYD

For many years I have been involved in various choirs, both church- and community-based.

I have been fortunate enough to lead various singing groups, some of which have comprised mainly blind and partially sighted people, and others mainly sighted people. I am blind myself. In this article we will explore how choirs and singing groups can be made as accessible as possible to those of us who are blind or partially sighted.

But first, why reference the tea break? This may not appear to be the most important consideration when trying to create an inclusive choir. However, I always say that it's not the accessibility of the singing session that is my primary concern, but how I will be included in the social times, the moments that are generally unstructured and spontaneous. It's not just a case of getting a cuppa; it's about interaction and how to develop friendships within the group. Remember that, for many of us who are blind, it is difficult to initiate connection and conversation. We often rely on others to seek us out first. This may sound trivial, but it's not – feeling an equal part of something, especially something centred on a worshipful encounter with the divine, is of utmost importance. A singing session, where I might have difficulty following the music or memorizing everything, may cause some uncertainty. Not feeling included socially could be the difference between choosing to stay after one or two sessions. So, the context is crucial. This is, of course, the same for all members of the choir but is especially true for those of us who cannot see what is going on.

JUST ASK

Now, to what you might expect when thinking about how to include blind and partially sighted people. What

can we all do to make sure that we include each other? Remember, inclusion is not about doing for or helping, it is about ensuring that all can participate equally.

Any choir that insists on members needing to be able to sight-read has already unwittingly excluded most, if not all, of us who cannot read print. The likelihood is that what you are really asking for are singers who can learn parts quickly and accurately, but that is not the same as sight-reading. One of the biggest tragedies for those of us who are blind is that music has become an extremely visual occupation, rather than an auditory experience in its purest form.

A relatively small number of blind people can read braille music. This is an invaluable resource for those who are familiar with it. However, two significant issues need to be considered. First, the repertoire available in braille music is limited. This means that it will not always be possible to obtain the pieces your choir is working on. It may be possible to get music transcribed, but this takes a while and needs to be planned well in advance. The other important thing to consider is that the person who reads braille music needs to read and learn; it is not possible to read notation and words together quickly enough for most braille music readers.

A more common way of using braille is for reading and learning words. This is relatively easy to produce from a digital document or web page. The advantage of having at least the words in braille is that it leaves learning capacity for the notes. Again, there needs to be careful planning. Some people have the resources to be able to produce braille; many do not and may need to contact a service provider to obtain an embossed copy.

While we are thinking about various reading formats, it is important to remember that braille



The key principle is always to ask. Ask the blind or partially sighted person what will be most useful in enabling full participation

is used by a small minority of blind people. It is important for those of us who do use it, but we must not assume that it is the solution for the majority. What is often overlooked, is the extent to which large print, or even simply clear print with fonts that are easy to read, can assist many blind and partially sighted people. Enlarged scores may be of use to some; others prefer just the words, leaving them free to concentrate on learning the notes. There isn't space here to go into the numerous ways of producing large print, but suffice to say that it is crucial to understand that simply enlarging something from A4 to A3 may not do the job. It will not only help destroy the rainforests, but perhaps also the confidence of the partially sighted musician.

The key principle is always to ask. Ask the blind or partially sighted person what will be most useful in enabling full participation. Is there something you can do to assist in producing accessible materials, or at least providing a digital file that can be edited or transcribed.

LEARNING MUSIC

In my experience, one of the most effective ways to learn new material is from audio. When it comes to audio, we need to consider how people learn. Many people learn melodically, which is to say that they learn a melody or part on its own. Others, including myself, learn harmonically: we learn by listening to how the part relates to the other harmonies.

Over the years, we have found that providing a recording in which the relevant voice part is louder than the others, works best for both kinds of learners. This is a time-consuming activity, but it really makes a difference, not only for blind and partially sighted learners, but for other choir members, too. Many people will be able to use a mobile phone or similar device to play audio files that can be shared via email

or a file-sharing platform. Some may prefer audio tracks on CD.

A key principle of full inclusion is the idea that we include each other. There is no reason why the blind or partially sighted singer cannot be a committee member, soloist or director of music if they have the right skills. Of course, things may need to be done in a different way and the whole choir may need to adapt.

It may also be worth considering the choice of choir pieces. Some pieces are easier to learn than others. Indeed, some very simple chants or anthems may be just as effective for worship. Choral pieces that employ block harmony are generally easier to learn than those that have a lot of counterpoint or moving parts. The point here is not to try to restrict options, but to recognize that a variety of musical styles will benefit everyone and enhance worship rather than suppress it.

To be fully inclusive is as much about a change in mindset as about making practical modifications. If the choir is open about embracing everybody, then those who may be struggling are more likely to ask for assistance or come to terms with their own requirements. You may not know that someone is partially sighted, and they may be reluctant to share this information if they are unsure of how people will react.

Being involved with choirs as both member and leader has given me some of the most enriching experiences of my life. Choral singing is something that blind and partially sighted people should be able to enjoy without fear of not being accepted because we cannot sight-read or the perception that we will not fit in. If we are committed to the all-embracing love of God, then it is a gospel imperative to do all we can to ensure that everyone can participate fully, not out of a sense of pity or charity, but from a deep spiritual sense of welcome and equality.



Above: The North Children's Choir.

JAM FOR REFUGEES

PUTTING ON A BENEFIT CONCERT

TERRY NORMAN

People who say something can't be done should not
get in the way of those who are doing it.

Currently, about 1 per cent of the world's population is displaced. By the end of 2022, the UNHCR estimated there were 35.3 million refugees, 62.5 million internally displaced people, 5.4 million asylum seekers and 5.2 million in need of international protection. These numbers are likely to be higher now, a catastrophe of monumental proportions.

In my own country of Australia, our treatment of refugees is nothing to be proud of. Many refugees granted short-term stay are still awaiting responses to visa applications, court hearings or ministerial interventions, with some waiting 10 to 13 years. This wait has significantly impacted their health and well-being, with up to 10,000 asylum seekers still waiting for permanent residency responses.

There are many global issues demanding our attention: world peace, climate change, women's

rights and animal rights, to name a few. Watching the news is harrowing, with ongoing wars in Ukraine, the Middle East and Sudan negatively impacting on countless people. The refugee crisis, however, remains urgent. The temptation is to throw our hands in the air and say, well this is too big for me. The problem is big – too big for me to solve, and I dare say too big for any single reader of CMQ to solve – but what can we as Christians and musicians do about it?

I decided that perhaps I could make a difference in my little corner of the world. And so, the idea of Jam for Refugees was born, the word 'jam' being representative of both a musical event and food. The first three Jams were held in All Saints Anglican Church in Ainslie, a suburb of Canberra, Australia's capital city. The next three were at St Paul's Anglican Church in Geelong, in collaboration with CRAG (Combined Refugee Action Group Geelong). In 2021,

due to Covid, we held a Radio Jam, a three-hour programme with local musicians and school groups. Somewhat to our surprise, this raised almost as much as the live Jams.

ON A ROLL

So far, six Jams have been held; each has been a 10-hour concert (running from 11am to 9pm), consisting of a series of 30-minute time slots and involving many local musicians. We have included organists, pianists, choirs, singers, small ensembles of all sorts and large ensembles. I would dearly like to involve dancers, but have been unable to find the right group. We have always been keen to involve schoolchildren, so we have had school choirs and school ensembles.

Entry to the Jam is by donation at the door. Some give very little, others quite a lot. We respect each donation, irrespective of the amount. People are invited to come and go as they please; we have the saying, 'come when you can, leave when you must'.

Each Jam is opened and closed by a church or civic dignitary, and every two hours or so, somebody speaks for 5–10 minutes. Speakers have included senior church figures, civic dignitaries, writers, people who work with refugees and refugees themselves.

We usually hold a barbecue in the church grounds for part of the time while the Jam is running. A barbecue is perhaps a very Australian institution, but it raises a bit more money. Sometimes we have offered afternoon tea in the church hall. My experience has been that people are, by and large, keen to be involved with what they see as a worthwhile cause. It is also encouraging to see the sense of camaraderie on the day.

The Jam always concludes with a performance of *Jerusalem*, with a local choir leading the singing, and everyone in the audience joining in. It has been accompanied by organ, sometimes with a string group as well.

SPREAD THE WORD

So far, for every Jam we have been able to make the claim that all money raised will benefit refugees. The organizers of the Jam are all volunteers. The Jam is run under the auspices of the parish church; we are covered by the church insurance policy and don't have to pay to hire a venue. We have also relied on free publicity, but our experience has been that newspapers, radio stations and other media outlets are willing to support such events.

We also never pay musicians for performing. That is understood as part of the deal. But again,

my experience has been that people are only too willing to participate in charity events.

Of course, the big question is whether the Jams have been a success, and that is difficult to answer. Certainly, from a financial point of view, we have never raised as much as I had hoped, but we have raised quite a bit, and that is good.

But has it raised awareness? It's easy to think that those who attend – whether to perform, help or listen – are already committed. But that will not be the case with everybody in attendance, and many who haven't attended might still hear about the event and reflect on the cause.

Bad things happen when good people do nothing

In any case, I believe we must keep trying. For Christians, this might feel like a duty, but others with a conscience, regardless of their faith, might see it as a human duty.

Finally, the big question: could your church or cathedral run a Jam for Refugees event? It does need work, but it is easy enough to form a committee and spread the workload. And, of course, if you should decide that your church can run a Jam, you don't need to follow the plan we used in Australia.

I am aware that a lot of churches are fighting to survive financially, and that some people might say that it takes all their energy to keep their church afloat, let alone worry about anything else. If this is the case, then I suggest that it is even more important that you run something like a Jam. If we continue to look inwards, we will become redundant and will surely perish. If we look outwards, are we not fulfilling Jesus' command to love our neighbour?

North Children's Choir was established by the Geelong charity, Bluebird Foundation, in 2019. It provides opportunities for talented young singers aged 6–12 years to navigate a pathway to musical excellence. The young choristers and their families represent a wide range of cultural backgrounds, with 11 different languages being spoken in choristers' homes! While most of these young singers were born in Australia, many have a connection to the refugee experience through parents, family members and friends.