



***Best Ideas: Music &
Worship in This Most
Unusual Time***

November 14, 2020

1: Keeping Choirs Engaged While Not Meeting in Person

Silver Spring, MD: I have asked my choir members to sing pieces virtually for special days such as All Saints' Day and Christmas Eve. About once a month we have a gathering over Zoom. For the regular streaming service, we have three different sets of quartets from the choir sing liturgy, hymns, and anthems.

Charlotte, NC: Through Zoom, we have choir members lead devotions, work on a song via YouTube, vocalize, and fellowship. For Advent, I am pairing members in our adult music program with our younger musicians as a way to create relationships and connections through letters, music, and more.

Easton, MD: Our choir continues to meet on a bi-weekly basis for a check-in, devotion, and discussion about why and how we sing. We are exploring text and its relationship to scripture, as well as historical context—things we wouldn't have as much time for in a "normal" situation.

DeSoto, TX: I write theological reflections around particular topics or hymns and share them, along with a link to a piece of music, with the choir. I also remember each choir member on their birthday with a note and a link to a particular piece of music for them to listen to. This is a way to thank them for their commitment and to also remind them that, even in this time of physical distancing, we are still connected.

Benton, AR: We make a weekly video report from the choir room that includes announcements, joys and concerns, birthdays, a short music lesson, and a devotional. We use the app Mixcord for ensemble singing. Singers record separately, but the app mixes it instantly.

Medford, MA: I share videos of new and old songs.

Dallas, TX: I facilitate meetings on Zoom, make phone calls, and send cards.

Atlanta, GA: My children's choirs meet via Zoom weekly to connect through music. We sing, play our rhythm instruments, dance and move, and have a weekly Bible story with related song and devotion. We have also played online music bingo and music Jeopardy.

Columbia, KY: We meet via Zoom or Google Meet, though rehearsals are, unfortunately, "one-way." It is best for everyone to leave their mics muted while I work various sections from the keyboard. (Usually, turning my video off creates better audio for the choir.) Prior to each rehearsal we (secretly) appoint a different person each session to be there early as the greeter/host. This person creates a positive atmosphere, engaging people to talk and share. I'll jump in when it's time for the rehearsal. We close with someone in the group sharing scripture and leading in prayer.

Punta Gorda, FL: I provide personal weekly videos of favorite music and choirs.

Bedford, TX: We have been doing Zoom rehearsals in which we will sing along (everyone muted) with a recording of pieces we have sung before; I send a PDF of music ahead of time. We also work on virtual choir videos and watch documentaries about choirs or other pertinent information.

Bend, OR: We publish a weekly Music Ministry newsletter that includes updates, sharing, prayer concerns, and a message from the director with a quote of inspiration. We also meet every other Wednesday on Zoom and include some rehearsing (from your own home), vocal technique, and musicianship tips.

Glen Ellyn, IL: My choir enjoys Zoom rehearsals that have a social element like trivia, a scavenger hunt, sharing of joys and concerns, etc. They especially enjoy singing along to previous recordings and following along with the sheet music on a shared screen. I have also had some luck with recruiting volunteers to sing call/response with me on Zoom. We typically end the session with a sing-along to a popular secular or sacred song that is well-known and uplifting ("Bridge Over Troubled Water," "The Storm Is Passing Over," "Lean On Me," etc.).

Dallas, TX: I have offered two music-reading courses in Google Meet, open to anyone through our Groups Ministry. For my treble ensemble, I made and sent MP3 files of each part with a practice copy of a new piece to challenge and keep them engaged. We also meet online for support. Our bell choirs are rehearsing weekly as two smaller ensembles of six each. We meet with one ringer per table, all distanced.

Rocklin, CA: I am providing my choir with YouTube examples of choirs rehearsing on Zoom to keep their interest in singing.

Fort Worth, TX: I email a choir newsletter each Tuesday that lists all the service music for the coming Sunday with YouTube links for listening.

Washington, D.C.: My choir occasionally gathers via Zoom just for a social time. They are given a discussion question each time we meet. For example: If you could meet two people, one deceased and one living, who would they be? What is a favorite book you've recently read? It has given us a chance to get to know each other much more than we ever could during the limited social time during rehearsal.

Angleton, TX: I keep in personal touch regularly by phone and email.

Multiple Locations: Stay connected via Zoom.

2: *Using the Organ in Worship*

Mechanicville, NY: Many congregations are not allowing any singing, even with masks; others allow "humming" along. I suggest selecting specific stanzas of hymns (with emphasis on text) and using the organ to play variations on the tune. Meanwhile, show the corresponding stanza texts in print for the assembly (either in hard copy or on a screen), and invite them to meditate on the text.

Duncanville, TX: For our livestream services I sometimes play hymn arrangements for preludes, offertories, communion, or postludes, either by obtaining permission from individual publishers/composers or by composing my own variation on a public-domain hymn. Then we send a PDF of the basic hymn with music and/or lyrics by email to the parishioners so they can sing along at home or meditate on the words.

Wynne, AR: While singing in the sanctuary may be prohibited, humming never is. Always play at least one hymn tune that folks in church or at home can hum or sing to.

Phoenix, AZ: Determine the best placement of your recording device(s) for the optimum audio capture. A cell phone on the organ bench just does not do justice to the sonority of the instrument.

Fort Worth, TX: To avoid copyright issues, I improvise organ voluntaries based on my own themes. In the livestream's copyright attributions, I show that I gave permission for the church to use my improvisations.

3: Using Music to Engage Congregations at Home

Angleton, TX: Include familiar hymns or songs.

Coventry, RI: We are programming music that addresses current issues and emotions. For example, “We Believe” starts with “In this time of desperation...” We provide lyrics on a split-screen platform for those watching on YouTube.

Longview, TX: Since my small church did not livestream during the lockdown, I started recording hymns or hymn arrangements on the organ to go along with the week’s scriptures and pastor’s notes. I emailed the audio files or the links to the pastor, who then forwarded them to the congregation.

Clarksville, GA: We have been using our usual order of worship, including a Taizé Gloria, as well as hymns. The words and music appear onscreen. I think the regular ‘rhythm’ of worship helps the congregation feel connected and maintains as much of a sense of normalcy as is possible right now.

Spokane Valley, WA: We are doing a “12 days of Hymn-Sing” gift to our congregation. Beginning December 25 and continuing for 12 days, we will email a link to one virtual quartet or audio recording of our congregation’s favorite hymns to sing along with at home.

Indianapolis, IN: Send singing telegrams to members confined in their homes or experiencing health or other challenges.

Berlin, NH: We have one Mass each weekend that is livestreamed on Facebook. I create a worship aid through Source & Summit that includes the readings and all songs for that Mass (I can choose which verses; I can change the key; I can opt to just have the text without the music; I can also choose to have just the melody notes or harmonization). Once the worship aid is created, I can print booklets for our choir members to use and our priests to follow along with, as well as paste the link to this worship aid on our parish website for parishioners to follow along with at home. All copyright info is automatic with our subscription to Source & Summit and is printed on our booklets. We also copy and paste into our weekly bulletins for parishioners that choose to attend Mass.

Midland, MI: I have been recording and posting piano music, secular and sacred, on both my private and my church’s Facebook page. Throughout Advent/Christmas I will be posting a five-minute daily hymn, accompanied in writing by a brief meditation, scripture reference, and prayer. The meditation and hymn will explore the Advent/Christmas scripture reference and provide historical and personal stories about the hymn and its impact on me.

Salisbury, MD: We schedule a special spiritual “service” every couple of weeks through our church website. Local musicians develop and perform a musical program, based on a theme, and people tune in for a time of listening and reflection. It is not posted through social media but is accessed through our embedded broadcasting system.

Stillwater, OK: I’ve begun weekly organ offerings via our Facebook page and YouTube channel. For each installment of “A Little Monday Music” (recorded with iPad and zoom mic, console and myself visible), I play two organ pieces of contrasting style, at least one hymn-based. Going forward, I plan to also include two “verses” of the hymn or carol along with the organ setting.

Arlington, TX: Create videos and sing through your hymnal. First Presbyterian Church in Fort Worth, TX has a series. Each hymn is introduced and then a singer and accompanist perform the hymn— ideal for singing along. There are two videos posted on YouTube weekly. The goal is to, over the year, sing through the entire hymnal. Another idea is to create worksheets for children to explore specific hymns. The church website would provide the music tracks for children to sing along.

Fort Worth, TX: To help congregations at home, I send out in the church’s Thursday electronic newsletter with a link to a YouTube audio-visual clip for each hymn to be sung the coming Sunday.

4: Rehearsing Choirs Safely

Centennial, CO: We use Zoom breakouts for sectionals. Zoom is an awful tool for hearing each other, but if the leader is singing, and folks at home are practicing along, it works well enough to prepare for virtual choir recordings.

Fort Worth, TX: I make rehearsal MP3 audio files of each part of an SATB anthem to email to choir members for them practice. I also make audio files of SA parts together and TB parts together. The choir learns parts at home. A Sunday warmup before the service polishes the anthem to be ready for livestreaming. (The choir is socially distanced and masked.)

Sugar Land, TX: Children's choirs can rehearse outdoors using the following precautions and tricks: short sessions, one child per music stand (distanced), tambourines to tap rhythms, LOTS of movement, LOTS of visuals, high energy, and a fun ending like "freeze dance." Great for passersby seeing our church in ministry during a pandemic. Choir and bells meet in ensembles of six for short, 30-minute rehearsals. Ensembles present in worship one to three times per month, masked the whole time. No warmups are done in person. Links and helpers are sent in advance to spare in-person time. We pray/discuss outside at the end.

California, PA: My church choir (10-15 singers) rehearses after Sunday worship under the following conditions: 1) We meet in a different room (that has not been occupied during the service); 2) singers are physically distanced and wear masks throughout; and 3) rehearsal lasts only 30-45 minutes. Each Sunday, a rotating sub-group of only five singers actually sit in the chancel choir pews (for spacing). Other choir members who have rehearsed the music are invited to sit in the front pew of the sanctuary (a significant distance from the chancel area) and join in for vocal support. We are having in-person and streamed worship with about 20-30 congregants coming to a large sanctuary.

Midland, MI: I led eight weeks of masked, socially distanced, intergenerational bell choir in October and November. We recorded two pieces for worship in November and December.

Denton, TX: A soloist, masked and distanced over 20 feet from congregation, sings hymns and a solo in each service—in person and online. Handbells are rehearsing masked and distanced six feet, and play in church monthly. Email contact is kept with choir members for pastoral care, but they are not expected to gather and sing until at least next year, or until effective treatment and numbers are down here.

Stillwater, OK: We meet at the usual choir time (holding choir night steady on the church calendar and in members' lives), but only for 45 minutes or less, depending on weather. Everyone enters through one gate, has their temperature taken, and takes their place in a carefully spaced horseshoe formation (standing). Each person has their own "choir bag," which they keep in their cars: a large zippered Hefty bag that holds a folder, hymnal, booklight, pack of tissues, mechanical pencil, and singer's mask. After four good outings, we've become acclimated to our new singing/listening environment, using only the hymnal so far. We've made a few video recordings (iPad with Zoom mic) that will cheer our congregation via our Facebook page and YouTube channel in December. Some older members have opted not to participate until COVID wanes, but 15 individuals have taken part so far, including some older members. Further down the COVID road, I hope to be allowed to issue an all-come invitation to our congregation as a means of recruiting new choir members.

5: Clergy and Musicians Planning/Executing Worship Together in New Ways

Kilgore, TX: The minister and I are joining together to record a weekly devotion with organ meditations. We then will email the video to church members. The video will also be posted to the website. It's just another way of reaching out to our congregants who cannot be in worship.

6: Celebrating Advent and Christmas Safely

Carefree, AZ: Use instrumental music. A string quartet can play familiar music for Advent; add harp to the string quartet for Christmas. The hymns of the past that nourished us through hard times will nourish us now. This will introduce traditional hymns to the youth of the congregation who may not know them. It will be important to include the texts of these hymns with the music so the congregation can become familiar with the texts once again. A Zoom study of the hymn texts could also be available.

Lewisville, TX: I live in Texas, and outdoor activities MAY be possible (if there are no ice storms). I think we will definitely repeat 'drive-by' communion, just as we did for Holy Week before Easter. I haven't tried it yet, but we may try some sort of 'drive-by' caroling situation where singers can stand (spaced out, of course) at the front entranceway of our church, and cars can drive by to hear us (have to figure out if this will work). We are very blessed to have livestreaming available on both our website and on YouTube, so we will continue this. As part of this, there is live accompaniment (me) for singing, and I will sometimes appear onscreen to 'teach' songs; words are displayed onscreen. For Christmas Eve, we will probably do some sort of 'joint' candle-lighting experience.

Sugar Land, TX: Since we can't do the full "Messiah," we will be doing solo movements only, in the round and distanced with a string quartet, adding instruments (trumpet, flute, violin) to the organ on the hymns.

Tuscaloosa, AL: I've been working on a Virtual Advent Lessons & Carols service since Dr. Horisberger's session last summer. Local leaders who have not been available for reading in person before have been happy to provide videos for us this year. Lots of individual recording sessions plus archival recordings have provided carols that match nicely.

The Villages, FL: For Christmas Eve, we are planning to have our worship services outside. We will ask people to park at a local school next door, bring their own chairs, wear masks, and join us on the lawn. We will set up a portable stage with sound equipment and will celebrate Christmas Eve together. Social distancing will be observed. We should be able to put a quartet on the platform to sing.

7: *Simulating Corporate Worship and Congregational Singing Virtually*

Silver Spring, MD: We produce a bulletin that has all the readings, responses, and hymns so people can follow along at home. I have a quartet in the church sing the hymns with clergy. They also sing the psalm, gospel acclamation, and an anthem.

Ann Arbor, MI: Have a song leader to lead hymn singing online.

Briarcliff Manor, NY: Livestream via YouTube

Midland, MI: We have Zoom worship at 8:30 and parking lot worship at 10:30. At 10:30 the pastor is outside, and the music staff runs the recordings for transmission and monitors the technology. Five persons are in our sanctuary to lead worship for Zoom, with the pastor running the technology and the music staff providing live music that is then recorded for 10:30. On November 29 we will continue to offer the parking lot for those who want the audio via their car radio, but the worship leaders will be indoors livestreaming at 10:30.

Longview, TX: Post a bulletin on the website to follow along with livestreaming.

Honeoye Falls, NY: We have a hybrid service with in-person congregants (masked and socially distanced), interactive Zoom, and simultaneous streaming to Facebook Live. Both in-person and Zoom participants read and offer the prayers. Music is live organ. Other hymns are our virtual choir (audio only) with individual tracks captured using Soundtrap on the web and then mixed and augmented in Logic Pro X using a number of additional sound libraries.

Abingdon, VA: Record hymns with a small ensemble prior to the service. Include video with hymn/song texts in the recording. Play these back during livestream and/or limited, in-person (no singing) worship.

Stillwater, OK: Our remote/broadcast service includes hymns and congregational choral responses as usual, sung by a cantor who also offers a vocal solo as our special music. (In-person worship has no congregational singing, but the solo is sung.)

High Point, NC: We are using a lot of recorded video and audio for our online services and are utilizing Zoom for recording our singers—and also for weekly choir meetings!

Fort Worth, TX: Offer a virtual “Favorite Hymn Sing,” where congregants email their requests early, and the musicians record a sing-along of those requested.

Additional Ideas from Session Chat

Portland, OR: Our former minister and I met monthly to go through the lectionary. He would choose a theme/sermon title. We would then choose the hymns for the next month, and I would know what to choose for prelude, postlude, and choir anthem. Our new minister arrived at the end of August and lets me know what scriptures he's using each Sunday and his theme. I choose the hymns as well as the prelude and postlude.

Lewisville, TX : I plan worship (music, lectionary texts, participants, etc.) for both English and Spanish, and review with the pastors weekly. They provide guidance and requests as necessary. We rehearse a small group of singers to be onscreen for livestream worship (YouTube, congregational website), spaced appropriately.

Stillwater, OK: We're doing a livestreamed "Carol Sing" via Zoom, with requests submitted ahead of time.